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Cultural Heterogeneity and the Diverse Success Frames of Second-Generation Mexicans

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Abstract: Mexican Americans are the largest immigrant and second-generation group in the country. Their sheer size coupled with their low educational attainment have generated concerns that, unlike Asian groups like Chinese Americans, Mexican Americans do not value education—a claim wielded by opponents of affirmative action. Drawing on analyses of the Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles study, we challenge two underlying presumptions of this claim: the children of Mexican immigrants are less successful than the children of Chinese immigrants; and they are less committed to success. Centering our analyses on the hypo-selectivity of U.S. Mexican immigration, we maintain that how we measure success determines which group is more successful. Moreover, we show that second-generation Mexicans adopt diverse success frames that stem from cultural heterogeneity. Consequently, they pursue variegated strategies of action that include class-specific ethnic resources in their quest for success. Despite their remarkable intergenerational gains, the racialization of low achievement and the mark of a criminal record can be a death knell for mobility for the children of Mexican immigrants. Our research provides fruitful context to inform the current debate about affirmative action.

Keywords: Mexican Americans; educational achievement; hypo-selectivity; inequality; ethnic resources

1. Introduction

After nearly one quarter of a century, a new generation of voters were presented with the opportunity to restore affirmative action in California, and overturn a ban on the consideration of race, sex, or ethnicity in public education, employment, and contracting since 1996. Supporters of this policy hailed the new opportunity to restore affirmative action a victory, while opponents decried it an affront to meritocracy. Among the opponents is a contingent of politically conservative Asian immigrants—namely Chinese—who believe that the policy privileges group membership over merit, thereby placing their children at a disadvantage in university admissions (Rong 2019). From their view, affirmative action unduly harms their hard-working, high-achieving, and deserving second-generation children, while it unjustly advantages Hispanics and African Americans whose academic records, effort, and commitment fall far short by comparison. Drawing on analyses of the Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA) study, we challenge two underlying assumptions of this logic: the children of Mexican immigrants are less successful than the children of Chinese immigrants; and the former are less committed to success than the latter.

Focusing on 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans and Chinese in the IIMMLA study, we compare the life course experiences of the largest Hispanic and largest Asian ethnic group in Los Angeles (LA) and the United States (U.S.), respectively. Their sheer size, coupled with the polar extremes in their educational attainment and immigrant selectivity, provide a fruitful comparison of groups at the margins (Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008). While the children of Chinese immigrants—even those

from poor and working-class backgrounds—achieve educational outcomes that soar past those of native-born whites and Blacks, the children of Mexican immigrants have yet to reach parity with the U.S. mean. That 1.5- and second-generation Chinese have attained exceptionally high educational outcomes, even in spite of their parents' poor human capital, has led pundits to ask why the children of Mexican immigrants have been unable to do the same. From the outset, we maintain that this is a misguided question.

A measure of success that focuses exclusively on second-generation educational outcomes without considering varying starting points due to differences in immigrant selectivity invites a false equivalency between 1.5- and second-generation Chinese and Mexicans. We tackle the false equivalency by placing Mexican immigrant hypo-selectivity at the center of our analyses. This has consequences for social stratification, with Mexican immigrant parents' educational backgrounds shaping second-generation schooling opportunities and outcomes. As we argue, however, community and school-level resources are just as important for ameliorating differences in starting points.

To anticipate this, we proceed with our analyses as follows. First, we show that how we measure success—as outcomes or mobility—determines which second-generation group is more successful. While the striking educational outcomes of the children of Chinese immigrants have garnered both scholarly and media attention, the astounding intergenerational mobility of the children of Mexican immigrants has gone relatively unnoticed.

Second, we detail how the immigrant selectivity of the first generation affects the “success frames” of the second. As [Lee and Zhou \(2015\)](#) have shown, immigrant hyper-selectivity—a dual positive immigrant selectivity in which immigrants are more likely to have graduated from college compared to their non-migrant counterparts, and also more likely than the U.S. mean—yields a singular success frame for the second generation. The frame is buttressed by an arsenal of reinforcement mechanisms, and guided by a clear, linear, and sequentially ordered strategy of action to gain entrée into a narrow set of high status professions: medicine, law, science, and engineering.

By contrast, emerging from the hypo-selectivity of Mexican immigration is cultural heterogeneity, marked by diverse success frames and variegated strategies to achieve success. The boundaries of “a good education” and “a good job” are broader and more inclusive, and the pathways to achieve these are more multipronged and flexible in temporal order. Unlike the linear, sequentially ordered strategy of education to work pursued by their Chinese counterparts, the strategies among 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans may include concomitant education and work, as well as churning from one domain to the other.

Third, we unveil how the children of Chinese and Mexican immigrants rely on ethnic resources to guide their strategies of action ([Swidler 1986](#); [Vallejo 2012](#); [Zhou and Bankston 1998](#)). Among poor and working-class children of immigrants who lack parental and institutional resources, ethnic resources are vital. We stipulate, however, that the nature of immigrant selectivity determines the scope and class-specific nature of ethnic resources available for the children of Chinese and Mexican immigrants. For the children of Chinese immigrants, ethnic resources are both tangible and intangible: they include a sophisticated system of supplementary education such as SAT preparatory classes and after-school tutoring as well as cross-class ties through which information about preparing for and navigating the elite university admissions process is shared ([Lee and Zhou 2015](#)). Among the children of Mexican immigrants, ethnic resources are largely intangible, and include ties to trade schools, certificate programs, and into the local labor market. While ethnic resources differ in type, scope, and function, Mexican ethnic resources are critical in bolstering second-generation mobility, especially in the face of severe economic constraints.

Finally, we show how the racialization of achievement pairs with ethnic resources to shape strategies of action. Hypo-selectivity, the racialization of low achievement, and the mark of a criminal record can be a death knell for mobility for the children of Mexican immigrants ([Jiménez 2008](#); [Pager 2003](#); [Telles and Ortiz 2009](#); [Western 2006](#)). For the children of Chinese immigrants, by contrast, hyper-selectivity, the racialization of high achievement, and stereotype promise can assuage and even

erase the mark of a criminal record. By shifting the theoretical lens from the hyper-selectivity of Chinese immigrants to the hypo-selectivity of Mexican immigrants, we contribute to the literature in second-generation integration, education, and stratification, and tackle a cultural fallacy that thrives in popular discourse—that Mexican Americans do not value education. We close by underscoring the urgency of this project as opponents of affirmative action—including a contingent of politically mobilized Chinese immigrants—continue fighting to ensure that affirmative action in California remains banned.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Hyper-Selectivity: A Singular Success Frame and Tangible Ethnic Resources

The striking educational achievement of the children of U.S. Asian immigrants has garnered both scholarly and media attention (Hsin and Xie 2014; Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Most remarkable is the educational attainment 1.5- and second-generation Chinese from poor and working-class backgrounds, whose exceptional achievements far surpass that of U.S.-born Blacks and whites. As Lee and Zhou (2017) have shown, class matters less for the children of Chinese immigrants because of the hyper-selectivity of Chinese immigrants and its spillover effects.

While 51 percent of U.S. Chinese immigrants has a Bachelor's (BA) degree or higher, the comparable figure in China is 4 percent, meaning that Chinese immigrants are 12 times as likely to have graduated from college than their non-migrant counterparts, and nearly twice as likely to have graduated from college compared to the U.S. mean, as shown in Figure 1. This dual positive immigrant selectivity has institutional, ethnic, and social psychological consequences, including a singular “success frame”—a strict and narrow definition of success—that is bolstered by a linear pathway to achieve it and an arsenal of ethnic resources to support it.

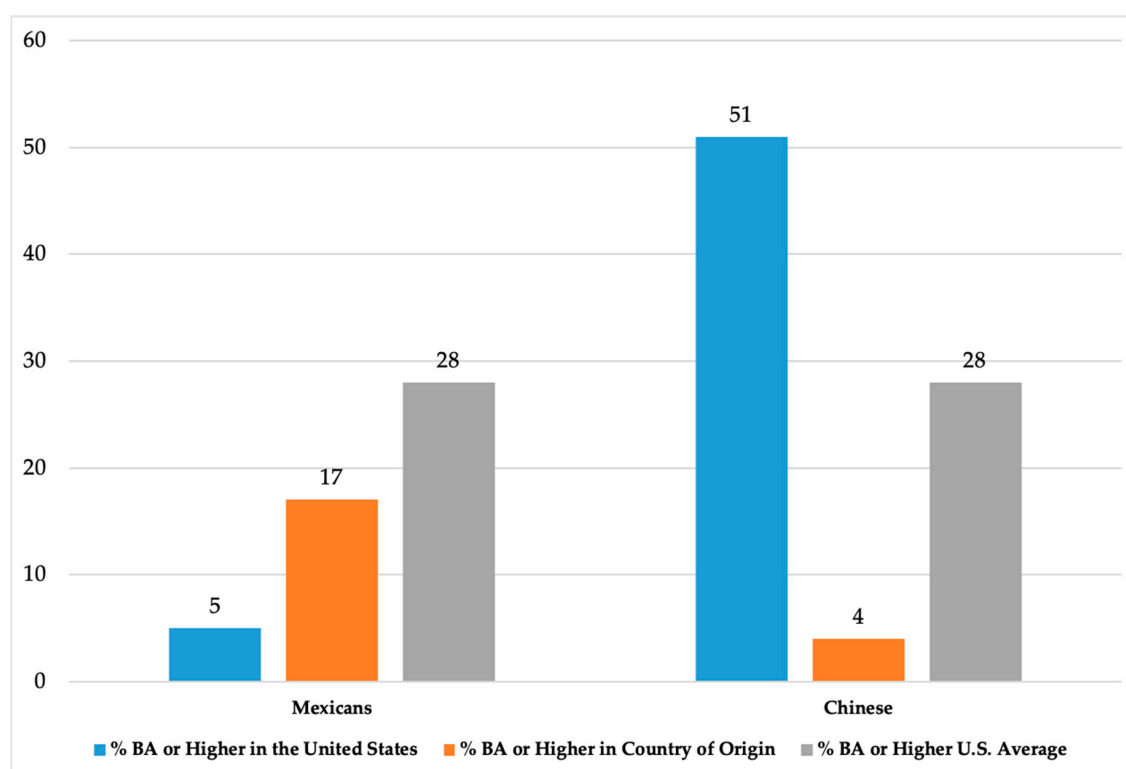


Figure 1. Hypo- and Hyper-Selectivity. *Source: Immigrant and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles Study (IIMMLA) Survey.*

This singular success frame maps out a clear temporal progression of events: graduating as the high school valedictorian, gaining admission to a top University of California school or an Ivy League university, earning a graduate degree, and then working in one of four high status professions (doctor, lawyer, engineer, or scientist). Simply adopting the success frame, however, is insufficient to realize it. Required are reinforcement mechanisms, including institutional and ethnic resources; in the absence of the former, the latter type of resources are especially critical.

Tangible ethnic resources include access to Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) prep courses and after-school tutoring programs that are offered for free or at low cost in ethnic churches, temples, or community centers. They also include the “Chinese Yellow Pages”—a 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ inch book that provides information not only about seminars and services that are preferentially available to coethnics, but also detailed information about public school rankings and neighborhood choice based on the strength of a school district. Thumb through the Chinese Yellow Pages, and one finds advertisements about free seminars, detailing how to get into elite universities such as Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), how to advocate for placement into Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes, and how to maximize the chances of admission into an elite university.

While these resources are similar to those adopted by affluent and middle-class white and Black American families (Calarco 2018; Dow 2019; Jargowsky 2014), what makes them unique to the experiences of 1.5- and second-generation Chinese is that they cut across class lines, thereby becoming available to poor and working-class coethnics. The cross-class nature of this information, coupled with visible coethnic role models who have “made it,” reinforce the belief among Chinese Americans that the success frame is both normative and accessible, and reflect the strength of their intangible ethnic resources.

Hyper-selectivity also affects in-group and out-group perceptions, resulting in “stereotype promise”—the promise of being viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype that can enhance performance (Lee and Zhou 2015). Because Chinese immigrants are, on average, more highly educated than the general U.S. population, Chinese Americans are stereotyped as smart, competent, and committed to education. With the racialization that occurs in the U.S. context, ethnic stereotypes about Chinese immigrants extend to East Asians as a group, regardless of immigrant selectivity and socioeconomic status (Lee and Ramakrishnan 2020). These so-called positive stereotypes affect the way teachers and guidance counselors perceive and treat Asian American students, resulting in enhanced educational opportunities and outcomes.

The singular success frame, coupled with a bevy of institutional, ethnic, and social psychological resources to support it, helps to explain why the children of Chinese immigrants are more likely to graduate from college than all other U.S. non-Asian groups, even after controlling for parental educational and socioeconomic status. In sum, Lee and Zhou (2015) solve the vexing Asian American achievement paradox that the classic status attainment model could not, while rejecting the cultural fallacy that Asian Americans attain exceptional educational outcomes because they value education more than other groups.

2.2. Hypo-Selectivity: Diverse Success Frames and Intangible Ethnic Resources

While the hyper-selectivity of Chinese immigration leads to a singular success frame, the hypo-selectivity of Mexican immigration results in cultural heterogeneity, which manifests into diverse success frames and variegated pathways to achieve success. Unlike Chinese immigrants, Mexican immigrants are hypo-selected: they are less likely to have graduated from college than their non-migrant counterparts and less likely to be college-educated than the U.S. mean. Existing scholarship attributes Mexican immigrants’ lower educational attainment to reduced access to strong peer networks and social network instability (Ream 2003, 2005), lower levels of direct parental involvement in education (Valenzuela and Dornsbuch 1994), and a disproportionate likelihood of living in distressed neighborhoods (Crowder and South 2003). Missing from the literature, however, is the role of Mexican immigrant hypo-selectivity and its consequences for second-generation Mexicans.

IIMMLA survey results (shown in Figure 1) reveal that only 5 percent of U.S. Mexican immigrants has graduated from college, compared to 17 percent of Mexico's adult population and 28 percent of the U.S. population.

The hypo-selectivity of U.S. Mexican immigration leads to what [Harding \(2007\)](#) refers to as cultural heterogeneity. While [Harding \(2007\)](#) conceived of cultural heterogeneity to explain the differences in frames that middle-class and poor teenagers employ in their understanding of appropriate pre-marital sexual behavior and romantic relationships, we extend this theoretical concept to explain the diversity in frames that the children of Mexican immigrants employ in their understanding of success.

Compared to their middle-class counterparts, [Harding \(2007\)](#) found that poor teenagers exhibited a wide array of competing and conflicting cultural models about what constitutes appropriate sexual behavior. In addition, he found less consensus on the suitable sequence of events that should lead to appropriate sexual behavior. The combination of diverse frames about appropriate sexual behavior and weak consensus about the temporal order of events that should precede it make cultural heterogeneity poorly predictive of behavior.

Not only does [Harding \(2007\)](#) explain that there is more cultural heterogeneity among poor teenagers living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, he also explains why. Poor neighborhoods are more likely to contain residents of various socioeconomic statuses who enact more diverse frames as they engage in sexual behavior and pursue romantic relationships. Given the heterogeneity in behavior, he argues, there is weaker social consensus on which behaviors are appropriate, thereby making it more difficult for adolescents to choose from competing options. Because there is both a lack of social support for a singular frame and because fewer people will have enacted any single frame to completion, there are fewer examples of how to achieve a particular frame. In short, [Harding \(2007\)](#) maintains that cultural heterogeneity results in a lack of social support for a singular frame and a lack of information of how to enact a singular frame to completion.

Applying cultural heterogeneity to the success frames of 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans, we posit that due to Mexican immigrant hypo-selectivity, there are more diverse success frames about the meaning of "a good education" and "a good job." Diverse success frames make it more challenging for working-class children of Mexican immigrants to choose among competing options, and also more challenging to enact a singular frame to completion since there are fewer models to follow. While a singular success frame is encapsulated by clearly defined boundaries that endure over time and circumstance, diverse success frames often overlap or contradict one another, lack a clear temporal order, and are malleable across time and circumstance. Phrased differently, the cultural tools available in neighborhoods and ethnic communities shape actions ([Sanchez-Jankowski 2008](#); [Vaisey 2010](#)).

Ethnic resources are vital cultural tools, and especially so in the absence of parental resources. While [Lee and Zhou \(2015\)](#) have shown how ethnic resources can boost the educational outcomes of the children of Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees, they have not considered how ethnic resources may also boost outcomes for the children of Mexican immigrants in their sample. Indeed, because Mexican immigrants, on average, have relatively low levels of human and economic capital, an underlying assumption among immigration researchers has been that Mexicans lack ethnic resources and that ethnic resources only exist within Asian American communities. We argue that the assumption stems from the biased attention to resources in the domain of education that facilitate entrance into elite universities. Consequently, apart from [Vallejo \(2012\)](#), researchers have neglected to consider the possibility that Mexicans have crafted intangible ethnic resources to the labor market, including in self-employment and contracting, as well as to trade schools and certificate programs. When Mexican migrants gain access to their jobs through familial or friendship ties, their hourly wages are greater than for those who do not gain employment through a tie ([Amuedo-Dorantes and Mundra 2007](#)). Moreover, high parental expectations are another type of intangible ethnic resource. Latino immigrant parents are more likely to expect their children to attend college than their native-born peers, and they hold high educational expectations of their children despite their precarious economic circumstances ([Feliciano and Lanuza 2016](#)). Moreover, like the tangible and intangible ethnic resources that guide

strategies of action among second-generation Chinese immigrants, intangible ethnic resources similarly guide strategies of action among second-generation Mexicans; they provide pathways to gainful employment, safeguard against protracted unemployment, and provide a shield from the threat of downward mobility.

3. Data and Methods

We draw on data from the Immigrant and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA) study, which has two components: a telephone survey and face-to-face, in-depth, life course history interviews. The telephone survey was conducted in 2004 and includes 4800 randomly selected 1.5- and second-generation residents in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area between the ages of 20 and 39. Reflecting the diversity of immigrant and second-generation groups in the LA metropolitan area, the telephone survey includes a diversity of ethnic groups, including Mexicans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipinos, Koreans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans, as well as native-born whites and Blacks. Interviewers asked respondents questions on their demographic information as well as socio-cultural orientation and mobility, economic mobility, geographic mobility, and civic engagement and politics.

A second phase of the study includes face-to-face, in-depth, life course history interviews with a selected group of IIMMLA study respondents conducted between 2006 and 2008. Rather than randomly sampling from all of the IIMMLA study respondents, three groups were purposively sampled from among the IIMMLA telephone survey respondents: Mexicans, Chinese, and Vietnamese. Mexicans were selected because they are the largest immigrant group in the country, accounting for 30 percent of U.S. immigrants, and are also the largest immigrant group in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Their sheer size—combined with their disadvantaged status and low educational attainment—often makes them the focus of policy debates about immigration, higher education, and affirmative action.

Chinese immigrants were selected because they are the largest Asian ethnic group in the United States, accounting for one-fifth of the total U.S. Asian population, and also the largest Asian ethnic group in Los Angeles. They also have the longest history of immigration to the United States among Asian groups. By contrast, Vietnamese are a relatively recently arrived group. The fourth largest Asian ethnic group in the country, Vietnamese are the largest Asian refugee group both in the United States and in the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

The IIMMLA study includes 162 in-depth interviews (including 24 interviews with native-born whites and Blacks), but for this paper, we focus on the life course interviews of 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans and Chinese ($n = 96$) since they represent the poles of immigrant selectivity. Among the 96 in-depth interviews, 41 are with 1.5- and second-generation Chinese, and 55 with 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans with an even gender and generation balance within each subgroup. The mean age of Chinese participants was 30.8 years, and the mean age among Mexicans was 33.5 years. Building from the interview questions and themes that emerged from the first round of reading, the first author developed an initial coding list and used ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, to analyze the interview data using deductive coding, and supplemental open coding. The codes captured labor market history, definitions of success, educational mentors, and experiences with the college admissions process. The supplemental codes developed during the open coding focused on the absence, presence, and makeup of parental, institutional, and ethnic resources. To organize the coded data, the first author then created data tables (Miles et al. 2014) that detailed the makeup of parental, institutional, and ethnic resources in each respondent life history, alongside a characterization of their success frames as either singular or diverse. These data tables helped illuminate which resources supported or hindered strategies of action during critical junctures in respondents' lives.

4. Results

4.1. *Immigrant Selectivity, Starting Points, and Redefining Success*

Based on analyses from the IIMMLA study, several notable patterns emerge regarding the educational attainment of the first-generation parents and their second-generation children. First, 1.5- and second-generation Chinese are much more highly educated than their Mexican counterparts and third-plus generation Mexican Americans (those of U.S.-born parentage). Second, among immigrant parents, Chinese are also the most highly educated. More than three-fifths of Chinese immigrant fathers (61 percent) and more than two-fifths of Chinese immigrant mothers (42 percent) have a BA degree or higher. On the other end of the educational attainment spectrum are Mexican immigrant parents, nearly three-fifths of whom have not graduated from high school: 55 percent of Mexican immigrant fathers and 58 percent of Mexican immigrant mothers have less than a high school education. These figures resemble those in the U.S. census, and reflect the hyper- and hypo-selectivity of the two largest U.S. immigrant groups.

The educational outcomes of the 1.5- and second-generation reflect the parental advantages and disadvantages of their immigrant parents. The 1.5- and second-generation Chinese boast the highest levels of education, and their Mexican counterparts, the lowest. Among the 1.5- and second-generation Chinese, 63 percent graduated from college—nearly identical to the percentage of college graduates of their immigrant fathers—and of this group, 22 percent have attained graduate degrees. Moreover, not a single 1.5- or second-generation Chinese respondent dropped out of high school.

The patterns differ starkly for 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans, who occupy the other end of the attainment spectrum, and exhibit the lowest educational outcomes of the 1.5- and second-generation groups, only 17 percent of whom graduated from college. However, what gets lost by presenting the data as a cross-sectional comparison is the enormous intergenerational mobility that the children of Mexican immigrants have achieved in just one generation. While close to 60 percent of Mexican immigrant parents did not graduate from high school, this figure drops to 14 percent by the second-generation, meaning that the children of Mexican immigrants nearly double the high school graduation rates of their immigrant parents.

Moreover, the percentage of 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans who have attained a BA degree or more reaches 17 percent. In just one generation, the children of Mexican immigrants more than double the college graduation rate of their fathers (7 percent), and more than triple that of their mothers (5 percent). While 1.5- and second-generation Chinese have far higher educational outcomes than their Mexican counterparts, they have made virtually no intergenerational gains. By contrast, while the 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans exhibit lower educational outcomes, they have attained far greater intergenerational mobility.

To underscore this, comparing the educational outcomes of the children of hypo-selected groups like Mexicans to those of hyper-selected groups such as Chinese points to a fundamental flaw in this measure of success. Esteemed immigration researchers have measured academic achievement as an outcome variable and, consequently, compared educational attainment across immigrant and second-generation groups (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Such cross-sectional intergroup comparisons yield predictable conclusions because they fail to fully consider the intergenerational transmission of advantage and disadvantage that places their second-generation children at different starting points. When we account for their different starting points and shift the measure of success to mobility, however, the children of Mexican immigrants are more successful than their Chinese counterparts.

4.2. *Hyper-Selectivity and a Singular Success Frame*

Philip, Second-Generation Chinese

To illustrate institutional, ethnic, and social psychological consequences of hyper-selectivity, we provide a portrait of Philip, a 25-year-old second-generation Chinese man who was born and raised

in the LA area. Philip grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Long Beach, California with parents who did not graduate from high school. He attended an elementary school in a neighborhood that he described as “the bad area” in Long Beach, but as soon as his parents could afford it, they moved to a modest home in Cerritos. His parents had learned from the “Chinese Yellow Book” that Cerritos High School “ranks in the teens” for academics. The Chinese Yellow Book is a 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick, 2500-page directory that provides a list of the area’s ethnic businesses, as well as the rankings of southern California’s public high schools and the country’s best universities. Unable to speak English, Philip’s Chinese parents relied on tangible ethnic resources such as the Chinese Yellow Book that they could understand and trust when deciding in which neighborhood to buy a home, with the foremost criteria being the strength of the school district.

When Philip first moved from Long Beach to Cerritos in seventh grade, he was unprepared for the rigorous academic culture of Cerritos. While he was at the top of his class in his elementary school in Long Beach, Philip was placed in the “regular” academic track in Cerritos because of his average state test scores. He explained, “I came out of elementary school in Long Beach, and I was below the expectation level of Cerritos. I couldn’t get in to the Honors classes.”

Concerned by Philip’s test results, his parents immediately enrolled him in an after-school Chinese academy, which he attended for three hours every day after school. When Philip took the exam for high school, his scores boosted him into the Advanced Placement (AP) track, which prepares students to attend a four-year university immediately after graduating from high school. Philip’s supplementary education did not stop there; it also included a Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) preparatory course in ninth grade, and then another in tenth grade so that he would be well-prepared to take the SAT exam in eleventh grade. The SAT is a standardized test that is required for university admission in the U.S., which most students take in their eleventh grade (the year before their final year of high school). Because the “Chinese Yellow Book” contains numerous advertisements about SAT prep courses and tutoring services, and because Philip’s parents saw that their coethnic friends were sending their children to SAT prep, his parents followed suit and enrolled Philip in the same programs.

His parents’ investment in supplemental education, along with Philip’s hard work, paid off; Philip graduated in the top 10 percent of his class with a grade point average (GPA) of 3.6 on a 4.0 scale, and later graduated from a top University of California school. Philip is now in his third year of law school, and along with working towards his Juris Doctor (JD), he is working toward his Master’s Degree in Business Administration (MBA) and another Master’s Degree in Law, which he will receive in the following year. Recognizing the competitiveness of the legal job market, Philip decided to earn “extra degrees” in order to maximize his chances of securing a job with a top corporate law firm in Los Angeles. When asked about the salary he would like to earn, he nonchalantly replied that he expects to earn “a nice salary of 200k or so”—a figure that far exceeds his parents’ combined earnings.

What is remarkable about Philip’s educational attainment and occupational aspirations is that his parents did not graduate from high school, and had little understanding of the American educational system. As Chinese immigrants who did not graduate from high school, they could not help their son with his schoolwork, nor could they help with his college or graduate school applications. Yet in spite of Philip’s parents’ poor human and economic capital, they were able to capitalize on rich ethnic resources to map out a clear strategy of action: they bought a home in Cerritos because of its strong public school—information they acquired from the Chinese Yellow Book—and also enrolled Philip in the after-school Chinese academy and SAT prep courses. As working-class immigrants who held high aspirations for their son, Philip’s parents accessed ethnic resources to help their son override their class disadvantage, buttress his academic performance, improve his scholastic aptitude test score, and broaden his opportunity horizon.

Distinct in Philip’s life history are the bright boundaries of his singular success frame, the reinforcement mechanisms to support it, and strategies of action that he and his parents pursued to attain it. He, his parents, and his broader ethnic community defined success as excelling in AP classes, obtaining a top score on standardized tests, earning admission to a top UC, attaining a graduate degree,

and, by Philip's admission, working in a top corporate law firm. This singular success frame dominated the life experiences of the Chinese respondents—regardless of parental education and socioeconomic status—and reflect the spillover effects of Chinese immigrant hyper-selectivity. Among Mexicans, a hypo-selected immigrant group, the success frames were neither singular nor as brightly bound.

4.3. Hypo-Selectivity and Diverse Success Frames

Unlike the singular success frame adopted by 1.5- and second-generation Chinese, their Mexican counterparts exhibited diverse success frames, characterized by more flexibly bounded notions of success and more leeway in the temporal sequencing of events to achieve it. Mexican respondents framed success in broader terms such as “getting an education” and “getting a good job.” These would enable them to secure a stable income, purchase a home, and achieve financial independence. While these markers of success may appear more modest than those detailed by Philip (the second-generation Chinese man we profiled above), they were often out of reach for their Mexican immigrant parents.

While Chinese respondents overwhelmingly adopted a singular success frame, just one-fifth of the 1.5- and second-generation Mexican respondents did the same. The singular success frame for Mexicans is characterized by only two key, non-specific components: graduating from high school, and going to a university. While the frame identifies both elements as essential, it lacks specificity about *how* to achieve these. For example, there is no mention of how well to perform in high school, what standardized tests are required for college admissions, and how colleges vary widely in rank and prestige.

Furthermore, unlike the singular success frame adopted by the Chinese respondents that shepherds them into one of four high status professions, the singular success frame adopted their Mexican counterparts does not mention career options after college, including how college majors may help pave a career pathway. Consequently, many turned to intangible coethnic resources which steered them to earn vocational certificates or guided them into the labor market.

4.3.1. Susana, 1.5-Generation Mexican

Lacking parental and institutional resources, 1.5- and second-generation Mexican children who adopt a singular success frame remain at a loss for how to achieve their primary goals of graduating from high school and then going on to a university. The case of Susana reveals how, at critical moments, the hypo-selectivity of Mexican immigration makes it difficult to achieve a singular success frame.

A 28-year-old, 1.5 generation Mexican woman, Susana migrated to the United States at the age of two with her parents—neither of whom had completed high school in Mexico—and her two siblings. Living in downtown LA, Susana described her neighborhood as “very, very bad” due to gang activity. Susana attended the local elementary school in her neighborhood, and in middle school, one of her teachers saw promise in her and suggested that she apply for the busing program to attend a more academically competitive high school. While Susana did not get into her first-choice local magnet school, she was admitted to Grenada Hills High School, located in a predominantly white, affluent community. And while she did not want to leave her local high school, she reluctantly agreed to be bused to Grenada Hills.

When Susana first began attending high school in Grenada Hills, she eased into the academic rigor of her new school and was placed into Honors and AP courses. Her excitement for the classroom was strongly supported by her parents, who regularly made clear that they expected her to go to college. Susana internalized those educational aspirations, receiving a B average on the AP track. However, she soon began struggling with her English coursework during 10th grade and was removed from the AP track, and placed into the school's “regular courses.”

Previously regarded as academically promising in her neighborhood school, Susana was deeply affected by the silent disinvestment from her teachers and administrators in her new integrated high school during a time of need. As one of only three Hispanic students in her AP courses of “mostly

whites and Asians” in 10th grade, Susana felt the acute isolation of being a disadvantaged minority among affluent and more academically prepared peers. Only 10 percent of her high school peers were Hispanic, all of whom resided in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than the neighborhood in which they were bused in as part of the city’s integration program. Of note, only 10 percent of her high school peers were Asian, but they were overrepresented in her AP classes. When Susana began to struggle academically, she lacked academic mentors and college counselors who could advise her, and also lacked tangible or intangible ethnic resources to help her get back on the AP track. Further, despite initially being on the AP track with a 3.0 GPA, not a single teacher nor administrator encouraged her to pursue higher education. Indeed, she could only recall one teacher who supported her: a math teacher with an “open-door policy” who most often helped her with the English assignments.

The hypo-selectivity of Mexican immigration is key here. For most Mexican respondents, success takes various forms. Susana knew that attending college was the single most important goal, but she was not taught how to gain admission to college, how to select among the various colleges and universities, nor how to apply for financial aid to make college affordable. Further, while her parents desperately wanted her to go to college, they had no means of guiding her. Neither parent had graduated from high school, neither spoke English, and neither worked in jobs where they would acquire this information: her father was a cook at a restaurant while her mother took care of the household and occasionally cared for other children for pay. There were no ethnic resources available to Susana such as free standardized testing and tutoring programs nor were there high-achieving coethnics in college to draw on to help buttress the success frame. While her mother “always, always, always told [her] that school comes first,” neither of Susana’s parents could support her in the process. Moreover, they trusted that she would gain the requisite information about college from her high school. This was not the case.

While Susana’s closest friends had applied to college and even won scholarships, no one at her high school provided direct guidance and she assumed college was “gonna be too expensive,” and chose not to apply. Two years after graduating from high school, Susana was working as a grocery store cashier and her parents remained so committed to her attending college that they promised to “do whatever it took to put [her] through college.” Susana enrolled in a local community college for one and a half years before deciding to drop out.

Lacking parental and institutional resources to reinforce the success frame of going to and graduating from college, Susana, like many of the Mexican respondents, was unable to realize her goal. Further, unlike Philip, who benefited from supplementary education offered through tutoring and an after-school academy run by coethnics, comparable ethnic resources were unavailable for Susana. Her attendance at Grenada Hills, instead of her local high school, reduced her access to peer social capital regarding college attendance (Ream 2005). Instead, the ethnic resources available to Susana connected her to better employment opportunities. A friend recommended her for a job, which allowed her to move from her part-time work at a grocery work to a full-time position with benefits as a customer representative at Bank of America. While she did not graduate from college, her markers of success—a stable job, an annual income that exceeds that of her parents’ combined income, health benefits, and her high school diploma—evidence tremendous intergenerational mobility within her family.

4.3.2. Flora, Second-Generation Mexican

Flora is a 27-year-old second-generation Mexican who, like Susana, adopted a singular success frame in which college was central. Further, like Susana, Flora’s understanding of the vast differences among colleges was scant. The primary difference between the two is that Flora’s case highlights how, absent parental and ethnic educational resources, institutional resources can be critical for the mobility pathways of second-generation Mexicans.

Flora’s parents met working at a factory in the garment district of downtown LA, and both were undocumented migrants until they naturalized through the Immigration Reform and Control Act

(IRCA) in 1986. Her father worked in the factory until Flora was approximately 12 years-old, at which point he bought a bar and began owning and managing several properties. Flora and her twin sister attended the local public schools until they were bused into Palisades High School from Huntington Park because their designated high school was over-enrolled.

While Flora was a good student, she was wholly unaware of Honors classes in her freshman and sophomore years of high school. She and her twin sister had been placed on different academic tracks so at the end of sophomore year, her twin sister advised that she advocate for herself to get placed into Honors classes. Her request was granted, and despite her increased exposure to college-preparatory work, she “didn’t find out about a lot of the information until pretty late.” She took the SAT without any preparation and missed many application deadlines. Flora got rejected from every school she applied to except Cal State LA, but she had heard that it was not a good school so she chose not to enroll. She shares her lack of familiarity with the college process, saying, “I didn’t know what units were and I really didn’t know what college was. To me it just sounded like an extension of high school to get a degree, a better degree but I really didn’t know the difference.”

Flora and her twin sister attended a local community college instead, and, there, she became part of the Scholars Program, though it “kind of happened haphazardly.” The counselor of the program took special interest in Flora and became her academic advisor, carefully explaining what course units were and telling her which courses she should take before transferring to a four-year college. When Flora and her twin sister were admitted to four-year colleges, their parents did not want to let them live away from home. Committed to supporting his students, the counselor went as far as to visit Flora’s parents in person and begged them to let Flora attend and live at the University of Southern California (USC) and allow her twin sister to attend the University of California at Berkeley. The counselor knew that if Flora continued living at home while attending USC, despite the short 20-min ride away, Flora would be less likely to graduate from USC. With the steadfast financial support of her entrepreneurial father, Flora not only graduated from USC, but also pursued graduate school. She completed a master’s degree in social work at USC, and now works as a social worker.

Flora and Susana both adopted a singular success frame and sought to attain a college degree. Both were beneficiaries of busing programs. Both even attended the same community college during the same period of time, and they each had their parents’ unabashed financial and emotional support. However, only Flora successfully attained her success frame. What Flora’s case highlights is the tremendous difference that institutional interventions can make for supporting educational pathways, especially absent parental and ethnic resources. Flora directly benefitted from institutional resources – in her case, a committed guidance counselor in her community college who revealed the hidden curriculum of college, and a “Scholars Program” that helped structure her time in community college. These ties to “institutional agents” are critical in helping Mexican children of immigrants pursue and complete higher education ([Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch 1995](#)).

While the pathways diverged for Susana and Flor, both were among a minority of the 1.5- and second-generation Mexican respondents who adopted a singular success frame in which attending and graduating from college was central. Far more common were those whom adopted more diverse success frames which included getting an education, holding a steady job, attaining financial stability, and purchasing a home. “Getting an education” is wide-ranging on its own: it often includes graduating from high school—a feat that exceeds their Mexican immigrant parents’ level of education—and possibly pursuing education after high school. Distinctions were rarely made between trade school, the local community college, or four-year universities, with the prestige and status of the latter insignificant altogether. Not only is each milestone imprecise and broad, but there is no strict consensus on the temporal order in which each of these milestones should be achieved, as our next case reveals.

4.3.3. Osvaldo, Second-Generation Mexican

Osvaldo, a 40-year-old second generation Mexican, highlights both the diversity of success frames within his household and the lack of consensus on the sequence of events necessary to achieve success.

Osvaldo grew up in Cerritos, a working-class community approximately twenty miles southeast of downtown Los Angeles. Osvaldo's parents always supported their children's educational pursuits and closely monitored their homework completion, but they provided mixed messages about the value and importance of a college degree. Osvaldo's mother, a fifth-grade graduate and homemaker, insisted that he get "a college education" while his father, a U.S. high school graduate and mechanic at Boeing, emphasized having a trade skill as "back up." Describing himself as an average student, Osvaldo notes that he only got as far as pre-algebra in 12th grade. During high school, Osvaldo was unaware of the Honors and Advanced Placement courses and he received no information from teachers or guidance counselors about college admissions.

With mixed messaging at home, and no clarity on next steps from his high school teachers and counselors, Osvaldo graduated from high school without applying to any type of higher education. He spent the next year seeking employment before following his cousin to the National Education Center, a for-profit school. After a year, he transferred to Cerritos Community College and attained his Associate's Degree in electronics. Osvaldo's father was then able to connect him with his first job at Boeing, where he continues to work as a mechanic and earns \$75,000 a year, plus benefits. When asked who most influenced his career pathway, Osvaldo replied:

I'd have to say my father. He's the one that was always right there telling me, "You have to have something else to fall back on." So he would recommend that I do this kind of work and learn a different trade so if where my electrical part comes in that I learned in high school, and you know, he's always been the one who like, you know, said, "You know, hey, if that don't work out, what do you want to do next."

Deciding between college and trade school was a negotiation between an elusive goal with an uncertain pathway and unclear outcome and a more concrete goal with a more certain outcome. Osvaldo illustrates how, with diverse success frames, considerations about higher education were tied to visions of prospective jobs after graduating from high school, and the practical application a trade school education. His older sister had taken a similar approach in attending a trade school for interior design, but she soon dropped out and is now a homemaker. Osvaldo also explains that his younger brother transferred from Cerritos College to USC, a feat they thought was out of reach for his family since they believed "you had to be filthy rich to go there." Though his brother graduated with a BA degree in electrical engineering and earns more money than he does, Osvaldo continues to perceive himself as more successful. Osvaldo notes that he purchased a home seven years earlier than his brother and unlike his brother, he has no debt, signaling his financial independence.

The cultural heterogeneity within Osvaldo's household resulted in diverse success frames, characterized by inconsistent definitions of and pathways to achieve success, and also shifting reference points by which to measure one's success. Ultimately, Osvaldo measures his success against his brother, and believes that he is more successful because of his home ownership and financial independence. Moreover, when he measures his success against his immigrant parents, he is more successful than they. With an Associate's Degree, a stable job with benefits, and an annual income that affords financial independence and home ownership, Osvaldo has made enormous intergenerational gains. Finally, key to his success were ethnic resources: they shielded him from unemployment, directed him to an Associate's degree, and ushered him into a well-lit path paved by his cousin and father into a career in electrical mechanics. These intangible ethnic resources prove to be especially critical in guiding mobility pathways for Mexican respondents who, like Osvaldo, adopt diverse success frames.

4.4. Intangible Ethnic Resources

Ethnic Ties to Higher Education and the Labor Market

Diverse success frames characterize 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans as they seek mobility, but adopting a particular success frame does not guarantee achieving it. Reinforcement mechanisms are necessary to counteract the stickiness of working-class status, and guide strategies of action. Absent

reinforcement mechanisms, success frames are poorly predictive of behaviors and outcomes. Just as the hyper-selectivity of Chinese immigration yields class-specific ethnic resources that support 1.5- and second-generation Chinese, the hypo-selectivity of Mexican immigration yields class-specific ethnic resources for 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans. Tangible ethnic resources such as SAT preparatory classes, tutoring services, and seminars about how to gain admission to elite universities were absent among the Mexican respondents, but they benefited from intangible ethnic resources that guided them to vocational schools, certificate programs, and into the labor market. These intangible ethnic resources played a pivotal role in directing their outcomes, particularly because most Mexican respondents lacked parental and institutional resources to support them.

For example, Adan, a 35-year-old, 1.5 generation Mexican man, grew up in Santa Ana with his single mother who worked as a seamstress. Both his parents were born into poor families in Mexico, and neither received any formal education. They divorced when Adan was young and had no clear educational expectations for him. In fact, Adan's father was pleased that he attended high school at all, saying "as long as I went to school, that was it," and there was no expectation that he would get his degree. Adan does not recall having any friends who applied to college and the only time he thought of attending college was when he was involved in football. He enjoyed the sport so much that he imagined a future where he would be able to continue playing if he attended college.

In high school, Adan began struggling academically. He noted that he "got lost in Algebra" and was never able to recover. No matter how hard he tried to understand the material, he failed his math class, and was unable to graduate. At this critical juncture, Adan wanted to join the Navy because he "just wanted to do something," but was unable to join the service due to his lack of a high school degree. Adan continued onward and attempted to make up the math class at a continuation school, but he failed there too, and eventually dropped out altogether.

Notably, Adan's success frames constantly shifted. He was successful in the eyes of his father because he was attaining formal education, a tremendous feat when compared to both of his parents who received no formal schooling at all. His peers in football dreamed of playing football in college but Adan did not witness anyone realizing this success frame. The armed forces, effective in their recruiting of low-income men in marginalized communities, presented Adan with an additional success frame, but he was unable to move forward with their recruiting process because he had not earned a high school diploma. Yet when Adan dropped out of high school and failed to complete his GED at a continuation school, he did not experience downward mobility or unemployment. Instead, Adan tapped into his ethnic networks, and his brother immediately connected him to a job at a dairy farm. Now, working as a machinist in a metal company, Adan views himself as successful because he has a job in which he earns more than minimum wage and also earns health benefits. He has achieved mobility through work: he no longer does the "extremely tough work" at the dairy farm, and has surpassed his immigrant parents in educational attainment, earnings, and financial stability. The intangible ethnic resources that proved critical for Adan's outcomes appeared throughout the life histories of our Mexican respondents.

Another respondent, Luis, highlights how his intangible ethnic resources were key in helping him find stability even as he experienced tremendous negative stereotyping. Like Adan, Luis also dropped out of high school. A 36-year-old second-generation Mexican, Luis was born and raised in South Gate, a city seven miles south of downtown LA. His parents received primary grade instruction in Mexico, and each completed 6th grade. Growing up, Luis remembers his mother working as a manager of a skateboarding factory and bringing home skateboards every Christmas, while he remembers his step-father working as a jeweler his entire life.

In 7th grade, he realized that he had been placed in ESL classes since elementary school despite being native-born so he had his mother advocate for him and tell the school administrators to move him to a regular English course. Luis described middle school as a time and place where "everything was fun," and he thrived academically. As Luis explained, everything changed when he got to high school. He attended Watts High School because his local school was over-enrolled. He described

Watts as a place where “you had to look out and watch your back” because of the many fights that erupted among students. Having gotten into so many fights, Luis began ditching his classes during his sophomore year. Concerned, Luis’ parents wanted to send him to a private Catholic school. As Luis relayed, “They wanted me to do good, and I was like why are you going to waste your money.”

With no sense for how school would become a hospitable environment, Luis became more regularly truant, electing instead to work more hours at his part-time job at a furniture manufacturing company, which he secured through a friend during his junior year. When he began failing his classes, Luis decided to drop out of high school altogether, and enroll in a continuation school. Removing himself from Watts High School also offered the benefit of a much-needed reprieve from the inter-ethnic violence in his school and his neighborhood. Soon after enrolling in the continuation school, Luis dropped his efforts, and opted for full-time work.

At a critical juncture just a few years before dropping out of high school, Luis considered becoming a police officer. One of his friends encouraged him to attend an orientation and Luis was really excited by the prospect but quickly realized that he was ineligible because he had not graduated from high school. Luis continued to churn from one low-wage job to another, eventually securing his most recent job as a lawn mower mechanic through his cousin. This has been his most stable and well-paying job to date. For Luis, both coethnics ties (to his friend and cousin) were key in helping him secure employment and achieve mobility in the formal economy, despite lacking a high school diploma.

While failing to graduate from high school in the United States typically results in unemployment, insecure employment, or employment in the informal economy, especially for native-born Americans (Hout et al. 2011), intangible ethnic resources helped 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans circumvent this fate.¹ Ethnic resources quickly connect even the least educated children of immigrants to the labor market with secure and steady employment. Not only do these resources buffer them from protracted periods of unemployment, but they also shield them from the social stigma and economic costs associated with a lack of educational credentials, thereby safeguarding them from downward mobility (Fernández-Kelly 2020; Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008).

While Adan notes that he rarely imagined going beyond high school, respondents who considered higher education conveyed the limitations of their parental, institutional, and ethnic resources in this domain. For example, Araceli, a 27-year-old 1.5 generation Mexican, was a stellar student growing up in Mexico and dreamed of becoming a doctor. Her parents completed elementary school in Mexico. After migrating to the United States at 13 years old, she graduated from high school with a 3.2 GPA, an especially impressive feat considering that she had only entered the country a few years prior. Determined to continue her education, but fearful of the costs, she described learning about a nearby occupational center:

It was near where I lived then one of my friend’s friend was coming to get some type of a technical industrial type job, and he came for training there and then he told him about it. He told him it was not expensive.

As the oldest of four children, Araceli noted that for her working father “it was very hard for him to support four kids and send one to college.” Hence, she calculated that the minimal cost of trade school coupled with the local knowledge of how to enroll and the guarantee of a job afterwards made this an appealing alternative to college. Apart from the lack of knowledge about how to apply to college, Araceli was dissuaded from trying because she repeatedly heard it was “expensive” and that “it was hard to get the financial aid and all that stuff. So I didn’t even go for it.”

Bereft of the parental, institutional, and ethnic resources to shepherd her to higher education, Araceli drew on the intangible ethnic resources available to her. These resources directed her to an

¹ Hout et al. (2011) find that, on average, immigrants who drop out of high school have a lower unemployment rate than native-born Americans who drop out of high school. Their analyses do not extend to 1.5- and second-generation immigrants.

alternative course of action. After Araceli completed two certificate programs in “data entry” and “computerized accounting,” she struggled to find employment on her own. She drew on her coethnic peers networks to help her secure a job. She explained, “I finished, then one of my friends got a job at a company, a manufacturing company then she got me in the company I’ve been working there [for four years].”

As Araceli’s case illustrates, the ethnic resources available to her influenced her strategies of action. The information she received from her coethnic peers led her to pursue trade school certification, which, in turn, guided her entry into the labor market for a position in which she earns approximately \$20,000 a year. The certainty of a trade certificate and the ethnic resources that nearly guarantee employment in the labor market afterwards outweighed the uncertainty of a college degree. As another respondent, Kenia, a 1.5-generation Mexican expressed, “I was like, you know, what’s college? Nothing.” Araceli’s grand ambitions of becoming a doctor quickly receded to the background as she sought a secure mobility path with guaranteed employment.

Even those who graduate from high school and enroll in college find that their uncertainty can be reinforced and magnified, as Esteban experienced. A 41-year-old, 1.5 generation Mexican, Esteban’s expectations for himself far exceeded those of his parents and his peers. Esteban always wanted to go to college but felt that his family only expected him to graduate from high school. He was largely raised by his older sister from middle school onward and she quickly became concerned that he would fall in with “the wrong crowd” in Maywood so she and her husband put their life savings into purchasing a home in Walnut, a middle-class neighborhood in LA. Esteban was placed in remedial classes in his high school and presumed by his teachers as “not college material,” despite his strong grades during his junior high years. Neither Esteban nor his sister knew to advocate for any changes to his academic track, so he trudged through high school feeling unchallenged while working part-time at an auto shop.

After graduating from high school, Esteban enrolled in the local community college, but after completing only one semester, he dropped out. When asked what prompted him to leave, he explained that one of his social science professors said to the class, “ ‘Out of all of you, maybe three of you is going to make it.’ So it really killed me right there.” Faced with what his teacher claimed was a small statistical likelihood of his success and the greater likelihood of failure, Esteban decided to leave community college and work full-time. His entry back to the labor market was seamless because he had maintained ties with the employer for whom he had worked part-time during high school. Working as a machine operator at a garment factory, Esteban considers returning to trade school—rather than to community college—to get his certificate in automotive repair.

To underscore this, not a single Mexican respondent who lacked parental and institutional resources described ethnic resources that shepherded them directly or exclusively into higher education. Moreover, those who pursued higher education after high school—whether trade school, community college, or a four-year university—often did so in addition to working in the labor market. The choice of higher education versus the labor market, therefore, presents a false dichotomy for the children of hypo-selected immigrant groups such as Mexicans. Rather than choosing between education or work, the windy road to higher education often involves work.

4.5. The Racialization of Achievement and the Mark of a Criminal Record

In the last section, we highlight the life course events of two working-class Mexican and Chinese respondents, respectively, Miguel and Brian. While both cases are atypical among the respondents because of their involvement in the criminal justice system, we compare them because they elucidate how the racialization of achievement coupled with the type of ethnic resources available to each affected educational pathways and labor market outcomes in the years that followed their sentencing. Both Miguel and Brian lacked parental and institutional resources to support their success frames, so each relied on ethnic resources. The different types of ethnic resources available to each, coupled with the racialization of achievement, resulted in divergent strategies of action and, ultimately, divergent outcomes.

4.5.1. Miguel, Second-Generation Mexican

Miguel is a 25-year-old, second-generation Mexican working as a grave digger in a cemetery. His success frame resembled those of Mexican respondents who had hoped to further their education after high school, yet like so many of our respondents, he lacked knowledge about how to pursue higher education and how to pay for it.

In high school, Miguel was placed into the vocational track, and was most enthused about his culinary arts classes. Miguel noted that he was “really looking forward to going to culinary arts school, but then I got kicked out of the program for speaking Spanish.” At the same time that he was forced out of the culinary arts track, his father forced him to quit high school football, leading Miguel to become further isolated and disinvested in high school. His behavior eventually led to his expulsion from high school.

After getting expelled and completing his high school degree in continuation school, Miguel got a job in book-binding at a factory alongside his father and uncle, who helped him secure the position. Soon thereafter, Miguel began to supplement his wages by working in the informal economy smuggling marijuana from Mexico across the border to the United States. He was caught and charged. Of his sentencing, Miguel shared that he was fortunate to receive a light sentence:

I was in jail for about two weeks and my mom and my dad bailed me out. After I got bailed out my lawyer fought for me. They ended up just giving me three years’ probation and 150 h of community service because it was my first offense and, you know, I’d never done anything like that, and they just gave me that. They weren’t really looking for me, maybe looking for someone bigger on the totem pole. And they just let me go.

While Miguel believes the judge was lenient in their sentencing, his involvement with the criminal justice system was significant. Entering the United States with drugs, rather than being caught with them in Los Angeles County, classified him a convicted federal felon with a permanent mark on his record. When asked if he thinks this had an impact on him, Miguel immediately replied, “I had a lot better job [then] than what I have now.”

Lacking parental and institutional resources, Miguel benefited from ethnic resources when he obtained his first job during high school at a book binding company through his family members. This protected him from downward mobility and provided him with a living wage, but his entry into the informal economy destabilized him. Remarkably, after he was imprisoned, he was able to draw on his ethnic networks once again to help him obtain his current job at the cemetery through a high school classmate. Still, Miguel places a high value on education and wishes he were able to go back in time, behave differently in school, and go to college.

4.5.2. Brian, 1.5-Generation Chinese

The second case, Brian, reveals how different types of ethnic resources play a role in buttressing educational and labor outcomes even after involvement with the criminal justice system. A 28-year-old, 1.5 generation Chinese man, Brian created and runs a design business with two partners—something he never imagined doing having grown up in a working-class neighborhood in Orange County. Brian recalls frequently getting into physical fights during elementary and junior high to defend himself and his friends from white “skinheads” who used racial slurs against them. After an exceptionally rough fight and a continued record of poor academic performance, Brian’s parents decided to send him to a military academy in an effort to change his personal and academic behavior.

Unbeknownst to Brian’s parents, the military academy included many young men who were involved in the informal economy, selling and importing guns. Brian formed connections with this crowd and became actively involved after graduating from the military academy. He began attending Cal State Fullerton, a school that his mom was okay with but “she wanted [him] to transfer later on” to a better school. Three years later, he was arrested for selling and importing guns. When the district attorney pressed charges against him, the judge did not sentence Brian because he was going to school

and had good grades at the time. He notes that he was “very lucky,” especially compared with his Mexican friends who were sent to jail for several years before being deported back to Mexico.

Cleared of all charges, Brian felt that the judge’s decision not to sentence him provided him with a second chance to do things differently. He transferred to San Diego State because he was especially interested in their film and history courses. Brian’s knowledge about the educational system carried over from his time spent in Chinese school during his youth, which enabled him to pursue his nascent interest in history. He described how he decided on his academic program:

I was actually going to go into film, but when I got there, I checked out their history program. I was always into history, you know, but I was just kind of nervous if I should take it on, because I know I can’t really do anything with history afterwards. Unless I become a professor, or write a book or something. I think – I plan to write a book later on when I retire, but that’s later on, so I can do that later. I don’t know, the history program was pretty nice compared to other schools.

The different pathways and outcomes post sentencing between Brian and Miguel are stark. Both were justice-involved, both grew up in working-class neighborhoods, and both completed high school in alternative school settings. However, Brian graduated from college and started his own business with a clean slate after his arrest, while Miguel churned from one low-paying job to another with a permanent mark on his record. Their divergent outcomes result from the different types of ethnic resources available to each that guided different strategies of action.

While Brian and Miguel’s success frames included higher education, only Brian received supplementary education through Chinese schools that gave him the cultural capital to navigate the college admissions process and his experiences in college itself. In fact, Brian’s cultural capital was so refined that he understood what majors required supplementary graduate school to carry any weight in the job market. Although Brian went from a four-year university to community college and back to a four-year college, he navigated the administrative culture of higher education with ease. Brian also benefited from stereotype promise based on his ethnoracial identity—the promise of being viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype that can boost outcomes—when the judge decided to clear all of his charges (Lee and Zhou 2015). On the other hand, Miguel signed up for culinary school but did not show up to the first day of culinary school because there was an administrative hold on his high school degree. With no alternative options about how to proceed and no ethnic resources that helped in him remain in the domain of education, Miguel immediately entered the low-wage labor sector, and has remained there since.

For the children of Mexican immigrants, such as Miguel, Mexican immigrant hypo-selectivity, the racialization of low achievement, and the mark of a criminal record can be a death knell for mobility (Jiménez 2008; Pager 2003; Telles and Ortiz 2009; Western 2006). Encounters with the criminal justice system are critical but only become “turning points” for some (Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008; Rumbaut 2005). Yet even in Miguel’s circumstance, his access to ethnic resources in the labor market safeguarded him from unemployment, as did those available to Brian. In Brian’s case, however, the ethnic resources of Chinese immigrant hyper-selectivity, the racialization of high achievement, and stereotype promise erased the mark of a criminal record, thereby providing him a clean slate and second chance.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Social scientists have shown how the children of hyper-selected Asian immigrants, such as the children of Chinese immigrants, exhibit exceptional educational outcomes that exceed expectations based on the status attainment model. Even those from poor and working-class backgrounds have been able to override their class disadvantage, soar past native-born whites and Blacks, and graduate from college at the same rate as their middle-class counterparts. While pundits reduce their educational attainment to Asian, Chinese, or Confucian cultural values, Lee and Zhou (2015) point to the role

of immigrant hyper-selectivity and its spillover effects, including institutional, ethnic, and social psychological resources that cut across class lines.

Critical in this equation are the tangible and intangible ethnic resources from which the children of working-class Chinese immigrants benefit, including supplementary educational programs and tutoring services to support their children's success frame. Because Chinese immigrants are hyper-selected, the ethnic resources they create and provide for their 1.5- and second-generation children are class-specific in nature. The resources buttress a singular success frame that emphasizes gaining admission into a small subset of top-tier universities en route to an even smaller subset of high status careers (doctor, lawyer, scientist, or engineer). These resources are not ethnic specific, but, rather, reflect the class-specific composition of hyper-selected immigrant groups. This point is underscored with the case of other hyper-selected immigrant groups, such as Koreans and Nigerians, who also endorse a strict success frame for their second-generation children, and create comparable tangible ethnic resources to help boost their educational outcomes (Drake 2017; Imoagene 2017).

Failing to account for differences in immigrant selectivity, pundits perceive these ethnic resources as proof that some groups value education more than others. Pundits then turn to other groups, such as Mexicans, and question why they fail to follow suit. In contrast to Chinese, Korean, and Nigerian immigrants, Mexican immigrants are hypo-selected: they are less likely to have graduated from college than their non-migrant counterparts and less likely to be college-educated than the U.S. mean. Only 5 percent of Mexican immigrants has graduated from college, compared to 17 percent of Mexico's adult population and 28 percent of the U.S. population.

As hypo-selected immigrants, Mexicans lack the human and economic capital to create comparable tangible ethnic resources, but it is a mistake to assume that Mexicans fail to develop ethnic resources entirely or that their U.S.-born children do not benefit from them. Looking beyond the domain of education, we find that 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans benefit from intangible ethnic resources that are class-specific in nature and reflect Mexican immigrant hypo-selectivity and cultural heterogeneity. Intangible ethnic resources for the children of Mexican immigrants include information passed along coethnic channels about trade schools, vocational certificates, and coethnic ties to labor markets both during high school and upon graduation. These ties have proven essential for those who drop out of high school, graduate with a GED, or seek work with the mark of a criminal record. While these intangible ethnic resources appear comparatively modest compared to those available to their Chinese counterparts, they are vital in quickly linking 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans to the labor market, and safeguarding them from unemployment and downward mobility.

By challenging the oft-held assumption that ethnic resources exist only within Asian American communities, we reframe the meaning, content, and utility of ethnic resources. For Asian Americans, ethnic resources help the second generation gain admission to top colleges and enter a handful of professional career tracks, but they are limited in helping them enter alternate career sectors because immigrant parents and Chinese ethnic communities have not developed the ethnic ties and resources into other professions in the labor market (Chin 2020; Huang 2020). For Mexican Americans, ethnic resources facilitate entry to the low-wage labor market and help them concurrently maintain a job while in school, but their use is limited in helping them gain admission to four-year colleges. Our research underscores that ethnic resources—such as cultural capital—need not be dominant in kind or limited to the domain of higher education to help the children of immigrants achieve their success frames (Carter 2005; Yosso 2013). The singular and diverse success frames for Mexican Americans privilege “a good education” and “a good career.” All the while, their intangible ethnic resources are quickly activated to avoid employment discontinuities and downward mobility (Bean et al. 2015; Vallejo 2012; Van Hook and Bean 2009).

We close by drawing implications that our research has for the current debate about affirmative action in California. For the first time in nearly 25 years, voters in the state had the opportunity restore affirmative action and overturn Proposition 209, which banned the consideration of race, ethnicity, or sex in public education, employment, and contracting in 1996. Among the opponents is a group of politically conservative Chinese immigrants who claim that the policy harms their

deserving second-generation children whose academic outcomes far exceed their less deserving Mexican counterparts (Rong 2019).

For opponents of affirmative action, the question of who is deserving rests on a measure of success that focuses exclusively on educational outcomes, regardless of immigrant selectivity and starting points, thereby creating a false equivalency between second-generation Mexicans and Chinese. If we were to reframe success to consider how far the children of immigrants have come from their immigrant parents, 1.5- and second-generation Mexicans are far more successful than their Chinese counterparts. Moreover, Chinese immigrant hyper-selectivity has made resources available to less advantaged coethnics, thereby helping poor and working-class Chinese achieve outcomes that exceed expectations. The question, therefore, is not why second-generation Mexicans have not attained as much as their Chinese counterparts, but how much more the former might have achieved had they been able to access the class-specific institutional and ethnic resources of the latter.

The consequences of reframing our measure of success and who we deem deserving are profound. Recent research shows that affirmative action programs in India incentivize underrepresented minorities to remain in school longer, thereby increasing their average lifetime earnings (Khanna 2020). Future research should assess whether affirmative action programs in the United States have similar effects given that affirmative action in the United States does not include quotas for certain groups. In California, home to the data represented in this paper, Bleemer (2020) found that Proposition 209 has had devastating effects on both the admissions and earnings of underrepresented minorities, especially Hispanics, who comprise 39 percent of the state's population.

Proposition 209 has widened racial inequality in the state; Hispanics' wages fell for more than a decade following graduation, and California witnessed a cumulative decline in the number of Hispanics and Blacks earning more than \$100,000 by at least 3 percent. These findings are especially striking considering that Bleemer's sample of UC applicants capture the same application time span as one-third of our interview sample. As debates about the merit of affirmative action continue to rage in California and across the country, we underscore the urgency of moving from a deficit-model of educational attainment and stratification to one that considers mobility alongside outcomes. Affirmative action actively accounts for immigrant starting points, while its absence continues to perpetuate the myth that some immigrant groups are successful because they value education more than others. Reframing our measure of success enables social science research to shift from the question of *why* have second-generation Mexicans been unable to achieve as much as second-generation Chinese to *how* have the children of Mexican immigrants achieved so much given how much further behind they started in their quest to get ahead.

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