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To cite this article: Jessica Vasquez-Tokos (2020) The “ethnic core” as an unsung reference group, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 43:13, 2396-2403, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2020.1789186](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1789186)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1789186>



Published online: 19 Aug 2020.



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The “ethnic core” as an unsung reference group

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ABSTRACT

Using longitudinal survey data and interviews, Edward Telles and Christina Sue’s book, *Durable Ethnicity: Mexican Americans and the Ethnic Core* (2019), seeks to explain both the endurance and variation of ethnicity among the Mexican American population. They offer the concept of the “ethnic core”: structures and institutions that promote ethnicity that serve as a counterpoint to the mainstream. The ethnic core is a major contribution to Mexican American and Latino/a studies that avoids valorizing a White, middle-class mainstream as the presumed “goal” of assimilation. Honouring Mexican Americans’ simultaneous participation in mainstream and ethnic communities, participation in (or removal from) the “ethnic core” contributes to intra-group variation. In presenting the ethnic core as an alternative to the “mainstream” (coded as White), Telles and Sue undercut the White supremacy pervading much academic scholarship and highlight the importance of a heretofore unsung reference group that exerts its own “gravitational pull” (the ethnic core).

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 13 February 2020; Accepted 25 June 2020

KEYWORDS Race; Latinos/as; assimilation; mainstream; migration; ethnicity

Edward Telles and Christina A. Sue’s book, *Durable Ethnicity: Mexican Americans and the Ethnic Core* (2019), is a deep dive into Mexican American identity that capitalizes on longitudinal survey data originally collected for the Mexican American Study Project (MASP) in 1965. Using the first wave of data, Leo Grebler, Joan Moore, and Ralph Guzman published *The Mexican-American People* (1970, 8), in which they write: “From the beginning of the research, our strongest single impression of the Mexican-American people was their exceptional *diversity*”. This insight is a through-line between the two books published nearly fifty years apart. That quotation highlighting diversity serves as a punchline for *Durable Ethnicity* which uses a second wave of surveys conducted in 2000 by Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz (authors of *Generations of Exclusion* (2008)) to argue for seeing and theorizing intra-group variation.

Telles and Sue set up the puzzle for *Durable Ethnicity* in contrast to European-origin groups (on which much assimilation literature is based), stating

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the need to “explain why ethnicity endures overall yet varies across the Mexican American population” (3). One guiding question of *Durable Ethnicity* is: “How do Mexican Americans view and understand themselves in relation to their ethnic backgrounds, and how do they manage or negotiate their ethnic identities?” (31). To answer this and related research questions, the book employs mixed methods, drawing on 70 interviews (from a subset of 1,500 surveys) plus quantitative analysis of surveys conducted with U.S.-born Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, California and San Antonio, Texas. This mixed methods approach is highly valuable, offering both trends identified from the random sample data set plus rich interview narratives that illustrate the broader patterns.

Durable Ethnicity offers multiple empirical and theoretical contributions to Mexican American/Latino studies and immigration/assimilation literature. First is the emphasis on internal diversity within the Mexican American category (see also Jiménez, Fields, and Schachter 2015; Vasquez 2011). Far too often racial/ethnic minority and immigrant groups are theorized as homogenous blocks, despite the plethora of sociological literature recognizing widespread stratification in numerous domains by race/ethnicity, gender, class, nativity, generation, sexuality, age, and more. Given that the social world is complex, fine-tuned analysis of data is required to shed light on patterned variation that is subsumed by aggregate group-wide claims. *Durable Ethnicity* does just that.

Second, Telles and Sue’s concept of “ethnic core”, which they define as “a set of dynamic forces involving structures and institutions that promote ethnicity, including ethnic social networks, ethnic neighborhoods, ethnic organizations, ethnic markets, ethnic media, and additional factors which create and enhance an ethnic community” (20), is a major contribution to the conversation around Mexican American dynamics and the question of intergenerational integration. The ethnic core concept is “a counterpoint to the emphasis on the mainstream” (20) that frees racial/ethnic minorities and immigrant groups from eras-old prescriptions to shed ethnic trappings. In theorizing the ethnic core, Telles and Sue avoid the trap of implicitly valorizing a White, middle-class mainstream, which hides in plain sight as the presumed “goal” of assimilation, unless explicitly theorized otherwise (see Alba and Nee (2003) for an exception). By removing the Anglo-conformity that has plagued assimilation theorizing, Telles and Sue offer an alternative vision of appraising life outcomes according to a different reference group: the ethnic core. Here readers witness empirics and theory working in tandem as the authors offer the “ethnic core” as a significant counterweight to the “mainstream” of assimilation theory.

An important aspect of the ethnic core is that even as racism is central to its construction (185), it functions to *include* racial/ethnic minorities. Telles and Sue avoid pitting the mainstream and ethnic core as antithetical to one

another, honouring instead Mexican Americans' simultaneous participation in both. These two streams of engagement can coexist, rather than involvement in one requiring the relinquishment of the other. Combating ideas of separatism, Telles and Sue write:

For Mexican Americans, the ethnic core can foster inclusion in both the ethnic core and the mainstream. For example, engagement with the ethnic core can facilitate contact with co-ethnics and organizations, solidifying and expanding social networks and social capital, which can be used in the mainstream. (29)

Drawing on the minority culture of mobility (Vallejo 2012), the ethnic core is not only a set of institutions, networks, neighbourhoods, organizations, and markets (20) – it also constitutes a bridge to mainstream networks, cultures, and economies.

Third, Telles and Sue devise a “continuum” that is bracketed by “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans 1979) on the one end and “consequential ethnicity” (their term) on the other that theorizes variation in racialized experiences. They make two interventions with this one continuum: they capture both “the within-group and within individual variation that exists in the Mexican American population” and they move “beyond a sole focus on generational change” (18). Honouring intra-generational variation, Telles and Sue identify factors leading toward greater symbolic ethnicity such as having a White spouse, light skin, a non-Latino parent, and being female (53). A minority of respondents fell on this symbolic ethnicity side of the spectrum. Consequential ethnicity which turns on “experiences of exclusion” (57), on the other hand, was experienced by “most ... interviewees, to varying degrees” (ibid) and is associated with individuals with medium and darker skin colours. The authors' observation that “an individual's placement on the symbolic-consequential ethnicity continuum can change during one's lifetime” (61) adds an important life course dimension to Latino/a sociology that is ripe for future study and elaboration. Further, the strong sense of “linked fate” (Dawson 1994) that is a consequential aspect of Mexican American respondents' identities poses an intriguing question about how this may play out in voting patterns (Gershon et al. 2019).

The symbolic ethnicity-consequential ethnicity continuum and theorization of the ethnic core are exceedingly useful in fact-checking theory against everyday lived experience that is more variegated than standardized. And yet the duality of mainstream/ethnic core leaves underexplored the *interpenetration* of Mexican ethnic and American national cultures. Specifically, how does one change as a result of exposure to the other? The authors address a dimension of this in discussion of a bilingual pay bonus for Spanish-speakers as well as of multiculturalism that reduces the stigma of ethnic culture. Telles and Sue say of mainstream-ethnic core interaction that they “do not envision the mainstream and the ethnic core as isolated

entities; instead, [they] view them as interacting and exerting influence over each other" (28). In their writing, Telles and Sue indeed operationalize the ethnic core as a substantial subculture that, as they deftly demonstrate, is not at all antithetical to the mainstream. In my reading, the authors may be able to make an even bolder argument than they do concerning the ethnic core as a cultural change agent. Exploration of racial intermarriage and the resulting varieties of biculturalism (Vasquez 2014; Vasquez-Tokos 2017) or "cultural hybridity" (Chong *Forthcoming*) that can occur when mainstream and ethnic cultures are in close relationship illustrates cultural dynamism and the malleability of boundaries well.

The term ethnic core is analytically neat and yet there is fuzziness or "blurring" (Alba 2005) around cultural borders. Even if the authors could draw out this blurred intermediate zone more theoretically, their discussion of empirical findings accomplishes this as they use interview-based vignettes to show how navigating within or between the ethnic core and mainstream happens on a daily basis. An impressive strength of mixed-methods research is Telles and Sue's ability to zero in on two interview respondents closest to their sample mean for deeper analysis. These two respondents hovering at the sample mean "experience their ethnicity differently" (73), illustrating the authors' point about in-group heterogeneity. These exemplar respondents who share "some thick ethnic experiences" (consequential ethnicity) (73) support the overarching argument that durable ethnicity contradicts assimilation theory's predictions for later-generation Mexican Americans.

In presenting their readers with an alternative to the "mainstream" that is so often coded as White, Telles and Sue swiftly undercut the White supremacy undergirding much assimilation theory. Even as assimilation theory has broadened to more seriously account for race (Portes and Zhou 1993), Telles and Sue honour the culture of their Mexican American respondents by addressing its "gravitational pull" that is "often overlooked" (108). For example, in the case of retention of the Spanish language, Telles and Sue point to structural factors such as the context one lives in that facilitates Spanish maintenance. Offering a direct counterpoint to unintentional linguistic assimilation over generations that results in English language use (Alba and Nee 2003), Telles and Sue argue that ethnic language maintenance is likely to occur for those who regularly interact with the ethnic core (108). In this illustration, we witness Telles and Sue theorizing on two fronts: one, they are in dialogue with immigration restrictionists who fear a Spanish-speaking brown people takeover and two, they are contributing to a conversation with new assimilation theorists by positing an ethnic core that exerts a counterforce to mainstream pressures.

Flowing from the authors' structural argument that accounts for enduring Spanish use into the fourth generation is a structural account for why Mexican American ethnicity is not optional for most but, rather, imposed and

consequential. This finding contrasts with literature that showed White ethnicities to be optional and demarcates the racial/ethnic limits to “ethnic options” (Waters 1990). Branching from this literature, Telles and Sue use the term “ethnic agency” to describe to what degree Mexican Americans’ ethnicity is voluntarily deployed rather than ascribed. With a hat-tip to intersectionality that highlights how social identity features (such as phenotype, surname, and gender) facilitate or constrain ethnic agency, Telles and Sue make an understated intervention about the importance of structure and context. The cultural resources available or lacking in a person’s social environment differentially equip Mexican Americans with abilities to participate meaningfully in the ethnic core. Contextual arrangements such as the neighbourhood one lives in and amount of contact one has with coethnics funnel people toward a level of ethnicity that is, to a degree, beyond their control. Social structure is an important influence on (even limit to) the volitional aspect of ethnicity. In this light, I read Telles and Sue’s argument about ethnic agency as less “agentic” than they do. In addition to corroborating the importance of physical characteristics and surname that raise or lower expectations of ethnic performance, I find that their contribution lies in the exposure of context and social structure as meaningful to the durability of ethnicity.

The question of how Mexican ethnicity affects respondents’ sense of Americanness drives Chapter Three. Telles and Sue make a strong case for American identities coexisting with Mexican ones (79). A direct response to those who worry about affiliation being zero-sum, Telles and Sue argue that respondents consistently prioritized their American identity and, secondarily, identified ethnically to varying degrees. The authors emphasize that not only did their U.S.-born Mexican American respondents think of themselves as American, they did not view ethnic/Mexican and national/American identities as mutually exclusive (90). Telles and Sue pursue *how* their respondents understand the compatibility between American and Mexican ethnic identities. They pinpoint three chief reasons for compatibility: (1) nation and ethnic identities are qualitatively different (respondents define Americanness in terms of birthplace, political loyalty, and economic opportunities, and Mexicanness in terms of culture, family, and ancestral background), (2) respondents think of their identities in hierarchical terms (with American as primary), which allows them to be jointly held, and (3) they define the category “American” as ethnoracially inclusive. This last point leads to a tension in the authors’ findings on which future research may shed light: whether respondents were making a factual claim based on their lived experience or whether, instead, they were asserting an aspirational ideological claim about American inclusivity. The authors hint at this tension but lack data to come down decisively one way or the other. They speculate that respondents may emphasize the inclusiveness of the American category “in order to make a normative statement about being American or to challenge ethnoracially restrictive

notions of Americanness” (98). I would be curious to know more about the moorings of claims of American inclusivity, especially given that the book is peppered with reports of racial discrimination. Even if the claim of inclusivity springs from hope more than reality, such statements do important ideological work by opening up space for Mexican Americans to stake claim to American belonging (see also Dowling 2014; Vasquez-Tokos 2019).

In dialogue with popular and scholarly literature on how continuing immigration affects Mexican Americans’ multidimensional identities (see also Rios 2017), Telles and Sue “challenge the idea that Mexican Americans automatically feel a sense of ethnic solidarity with Mexican immigrants and ... are biased in favor of immigrants” (174). Immigration may, instead, activate national identities and produce “reactive Americanism” (174). My recent work (Forthcoming) unveils similar dynamics, showing how Latinos living in an immigrant-dense area may emphasize their cultural Americanness (what I call, nearly identically, “reactive Americanization”) and employ social distancing strategies from lower-status Latinos in order to dissociate from derogatory racial meanings. The impacts of “reactive Americanism” on intra-group relations are worthy of future study. The socio-political context surrounding these race relations is also important: one conjecture is that reactive Americanism is occurring among the Mexican American respondents precisely because Mexican ethnicity is consequential. The authors suggest that boundary work such as holding an anti-immigration stance may signal patriotism and be done in hopes of “bring[ing respondents] closer to their goal of being treated as fully American” (174). Of note is that the self-interested ideological work being done here contrasts with respondents’ claim of “American” as inclusive, an intriguing tension worthy of future attention.

The authors do a superb job of presenting carefully collected and analyzed data that weighs in on important questions of what it means to be Mexican American in the U.S. today. Avenues for scholars to take up in future research include the question of whether or not the findings of *Durable Ethnicity* are regionally-bound to locales in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Do dynamics operate differently in other areas of the country further from the border or in locations absent an ethnic core? How do the “consequential” or “symbolic” dimensions of ethnic experience infiltrate Mexican Americans’ strategies to achieve desired goals, such as unquestioned inclusion in the ethnic core or the mainstream? Swivelling attention to out-group members, for what purposes, and to what ends do non-Mexican Americans also engage in the ethnic core? If non-group members participate in the ethnic core for the purpose of Spanish language acquisition, what inequalities (such as differential rewards and sanctions (Woody 2018)) might arise? Finally, does the presence of, or participation in, the ethnic core stall the process of the “disappearing Mexican Americans” (individuals who identified themselves as Mexican American at one point in time dis-identify later) (Alba and Islam 2009)?

The authors are to be commended for pursuing an emergent theme (ethnic core) to such fruitful ends. In the spirit of the best inductive qualitative research, Telles and Sue followed their respondents' lead to interesting and important conclusions. The innovations of the ethnic core and consequential ethnicity, which counterbalance the mainstream and symbolic ethnicity, respectively, have been a long time coming and are much-needed additions to race/ethnicity and migration/assimilation literature and Mexican American/Latino sociology. The stress *Durable Ethnicity* places on institutional structures that exert mainstream/assimilatory or ethnic core/ethnic maintenance pressures remind us that ethnicity is not solely a product of personal choice or even individual-level factors but influenced by context.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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