By analyzing the life course of an exceptionally successful Mexican student, Emmanuel of Brooklyn, this article interrogates current theories on the incorporation of immigrant youth, including “segmented assimilation.” The author explains Emmanuel’s unlikely and exceptional achievement as the result of intrafamily dynamics, including his keeping of the immigrant bargain; extrafamily supports, including “first chance, fast track” programs for exceptional students in the New York City public schools and the involvement of mentors; and Emmanuel’s development of “socially neutral operating identities” to negotiate his membership in new and disparate social worlds. The study shows the reach and limitations of current theories on the children of immigrants and opens new avenues for further research.

Keywords: immigrant children; segmented assimilation; intrafamily dynamics; socially neutral operating identities

“I am in my third year of law school, and I did not go to the same high school as my cousins.” This was how Emmanuel answered my question, “Where is your life now and how did it get to there?” His simple, concise explanation of why and how he excelled while his siblings and cousins did not neatly captures an essential element in his upward mobility. In this article, I seek to explicate his dramatic Horatio Alger ascent from great disadvantage to graduation from law school.

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NOTE: This paper was written while the author was a visiting fellow at the Russell Sage Foundation, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716208322988
Emmanuel is, by any measure, an unlikely and exceptional success. His mother, Maria, was undocumented for several years, and her husband left the family when the children were young. Maria was diagnosed with cancer when Emmanuel was in fifth grade and given only months to live, although she has survived more than a decade later. Raising her children with public support, Maria supplemented the family’s income by cleaning houses. Having only three years of school, she could not help with her children’s homework but strongly supported their educational goals. Emmanuel has been her biggest pride: valedictorian in his elementary and middle schools, third in his class in high school, a bachelor’s degree from an elite university—the first in his family to go to college—and a 2008 graduate from law school. Emmanuel excelled at every level of his educational career while continually negotiating his engagement with the street gang life of his brother and cousins. Even now, despite all his successes, Emmanuel feels that his hold on a stable, prosperous life is tenuous.

How did Emmanuel succeed despite the great odds against him? This article will explore factors external and internal to Emmanuel’s family that facilitated his upward mobility. The article then describes how Emmanuel developed “socially neutral operating identities” to successfully blend into each of his various social contexts—the hardworking, sacrificing world of his immigrant family, the world of the X Street gang, the black world of his academically solid high school, the white world at his elite university and law school, and the law firm where he now works. This capacity for developing socially neutral identity practices enabled Emmanuel to compartmentalize his disparate worlds, both to keep them separate and to fit in enough to do well but not draw undue attention to himself in any of them.

Theoretical Issues

This article seeks to explain the theoretically “disproportionate” success Emmanuel has enjoyed, relying primarily on a biographical logic of analysis in which detailed examination of the sequence of events and their meanings to participants enables the discernment of a causal life narrative. It selectively uses a cross-case logic of analysis, wherein the outcomes of various cases are explained by variation across them. In developing this biographical case analysis, I draw on ten years of ethnographic relationship with Emmanuel and intermittent contact during the same period with his brother and mother. This long-term relationship with both the primary informant and the others in his social world, and the interviews with each of them, enable me to trace processes and observe interaction and change over time and to get descriptions about key events from multiple viewpoints. This approach could be called an extended place (Duneier 1999) and time method. In addition to drawing on field notes and interviews, I refer to findings from my larger research project, a sample of about one hundred children of Mexican immigrants who were interviewed seven to eleven years ago and are now being reinterviewed in a revisit study (Burawoy 2003). Most findings presented here resonate with other very successful youth in my study.
The dominant lens framing the work in this volume is segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Zhou 1999; Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Fernández Kelly 2008 [this volume]; see also Abbott 2001), which posits that upward or downward mobility among children of immigrants is largely determined by the human capital of an immigrant group; its context of reception, including legal status; family structure; and other community factors for social capital formation and conveyance. Under segmented assimilation, the second generation can become upwardly mobile by moving into the white middle class or by using the coethnic community to foster upward mobility. Significant danger looms when first-generation parents cannot move into the middle class because stagnation or failure undermine their exhortations to their children to work hard. Such children become vulnerable to the inner-city culture of the “rainbow underclass” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

In this view, Mexicans face the worst circumstances, combining low human capital; negative context of reception, including undocumented status; and the greatest vulnerability to a reactive ethnicity that rejects and opposes mainstream institutions and norms that facilitate upward mobility. As originally formulated, the theory suggests that once this oppositional culture is established, it gains an autonomous effect, in addition to those resulting from the recurring structural conditions that produced it initially (and would sustain it at some level in any case).

The larger social facts of Mexicans in New York resonate in significant ways with segmented assimilation theory, but not in others. Mexicans have among the lowest per capita incomes of any group in New York and among the lowest aggregate educational levels and highest rates of school attrition among all ethnic groups in New York. Moreover, many in the second generation are dropping out of school and becoming trapped in unforgiving labor markets. Also similar to what segmented assimilation predicts, a significant number of college-educated second-generation youth have parents who were able to make it into the broad spectrum of the middle class. On the other hand, in general, the young men and women in my data set do not hold oppositional attitudes, and most work, sometimes at more than one job. Moreover, many youth in my data set, especially boys I had thought would be downwardly mobile, have taken advantage of the “second-chance” mechanisms and other routes of what I call “shallow slope mobility”—upward mobility, but of a relatively modest sort. Others are on firmly middle-class trajectories.

These findings are consistent with Alba and Nee’s (2003) “remade assimilation” theory, which argues that Mexicans are, on average, engaged in “horizontal mobility”—movement into the same kinds of jobs as their parents—but that average conceals large variation, including movement into the middle class for a minority. My argument will also draw on Kasinitz et al.’s (2008) “second-generation advantage” approach, which sees a general trend toward upward mobility, facilitated by choices made by second-generation immigrants as to which elements of American and immigrant culture to use. Finally, the upward mobility of Mexican youth in my sample, including Emmanuel, has been enabled by post–civil rights programs, promoting minority achievement, a trend also noted by Alba and Nee and by Kasinitz and his colleagues.
It is important to observe that the causes of failure and the causes of success need not be the obverse of each other. Some or all of the conditions that foster failure among many can also be present in the lives of those who succeed but can be counteracted by other factors or processes. There is also the contingency introduced by volition; different people in similar circumstances can make different choices, which can have cumulative consequences. Such individual or small group contingencies are difficult to explain through theories of social life, which focus on larger patterns. Segmented assimilation focuses on broad trends that predict that Mexican youngsters whose parents fail to move into the middle class, and whose children are exposed to oppositional, inner-city culture, will be downwardly mobile and join the rainbow underclass. Yet, knowing how this pattern fails to hold among upwardly mobile youth for whose lives segmented assimilation predicts stagnation and failure will deepen our understanding of immigrant incorporation. At the same time, we need to bring in factors not accorded theoretical weight in segmented assimilation theory.

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I argue that Emmanuel’s success in difficult circumstances was facilitated by three sets of factors and processes: (1) extrafamily contacts, including special educational programs and exceptional mentors, supported by private and religious organizations, and, especially, by the public sector; (2) intrafamily dynamics, including how children keep the immigrant bargain and their role vis-à-vis parents and siblings; and (3) the skillful development of “socially neutral operating identities” in a variety of contexts over time to keep separate, distinct worlds. None of these theoretical elements are given explicit theoretical weight under segmented assimilation, though some are consistent with its overall analysis.

Factors External to Family Promoting Emmanuel’s Academic Success

Much of Emmanuel’s success can be explained by two kinds of extrafamily support: special educational programs for exceptional students in New York City
public schools and good mentoring, both through formal programs and through relationships that emerged in other life activities.

Emmanuel reports that he stood out in grade school because he and his cousins were “the first Mexicans to go to public school” in their neighborhood, Bedford Stuyvesant (Bed Sty), but experienced only minor teasing. In middle school, Emmanuel was placed in a program with accelerated courses, in which the students had lunch in a teacher’s classroom away from the rest of the school. “We were in solitary confinement,” he said with a dry laugh, adding that “we were always the first to leave, early—so I avoided after-school fights.” The school helped engineer success not only by giving students enriched, accelerated courses, but also by separating them from students seen to be less gifted and by creating an esprit de corps among the select few. In high school, Emmanuel was also enrolled in a special gifted program, begun with corporate funding, which offered more demanding material, better instruction, and, again, isolation from the rest of the students.

These programs are consistent with practices described by Mehan and his colleagues (1996; see also Stanton-Salazar 2001), which seek to form an in-group identity that insulates students from oppositional attitudes adopted by other students, communicates higher expectations—for example, to go to college—and increases access to various kinds of resources. The programs are important components of the “mobility stories” of several of my upwardly mobile informants, serving as the functional equivalent of moving out of the bad neighborhood, a strategy that Konczal and Haller (2008 [this volume]) identify as facilitating upward mobility.

Emmanuel also benefited from exceptionally good mentoring, another factor showing up in the mobility stories of other successful informants in my study (see Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008). Maria, Emmanuel’s mother, attended a local Catholic church where the parish priest saw the boys on X Street around the corner from church “as his sons,” mentoring them and opening up the church’s gym to them on Saturdays. Father Donegal and Emmanuel would meet every month at a restaurant to eat and talk, maintaining a close relationship for seventeen years until Donegal’s death in 2006 when Emmanuel was twenty-seven. In explaining his grief later, Emmanuel told me he was sadder about losing Donegal than if his real father had died. It was not just having had a mentor but also the exceptional length of time Donegal mentored Emmanuel and the depth of the bond between them that had a big impact on Emmanuel (see Rhodes 2002; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008).

At Emmanuel’s high school, he was also guided by the head of the mentorship program, Dr. Tom Kelly, a young African American, who “exposed a lot of life to me” and “believed in me.” He brought Emmanuel to his first high-end, fancy restaurant, to his first play in New York, and opened up Emmanuel’s horizons about college. While the youngster had hoped to attend the City University of New York (CUNY), Dr. Kelly brought him to Elite’s “beautiful campus” and “sold me on the idea of going to Elite.” Kelly also dissuaded him from writing in his college essay about his mother’s struggle to get him to college—because there
would be lots of those—and to write instead about his experiences with gangs and how that led him to pursue a career in service. Finally, Emmanuel got aid in writing the essay from a CUNY professor (not the author), whose house his mother cleaned.

The presence of mentors and special educational programs is theoretically distinct from the factors that segmented assimilation underlines as determining success or failure—human capital, context of reception, and family structure—but not inconsistent with the theory’s larger thrust. The excellent mentors in Emmanuel’s life are consistent with the larger argument of segmented assimilation and also with Mehan et al.’s (1996) and Stanton-Salazar’s (2001) work in that they, and the institutions they work for, helped develop social capital among promising youth, giving them access to resources otherwise unavailable to them. In addition, the existence of mentors points to a public (and also private) commitment to provide extra resources for promising inner-city youth and to “save” them from their circumstances. The youth in these programs understand that they are seen differently by their teachers and schools—as having a chance “to make it” and, hence, worth material and emotional investment by teachers. Such programs aid participating youth despite the high incidence of single-parent families, hostile contexts of reception—including undocumented status—and low human capital. However, we should also note that those programs are not “lifting all boats,” and they might be cynically described as saving only the “savable tenth,” with the ironic echo of DuBois intended. Because the programs target those who show the most promise, they will not help most regular students in public schools to “make it” or make it very well. Elsewhere, I have written about the importance of second-chance mechanisms (Smith 2006, 2007; see also Cook and Furstemberg 2002; Kasinitz et al. 2008), but these programs can be understood as a public, “first chance, fast track” effort.

Intrafamily Dynamics and Mobility

Certain intrafamily dynamics contributed to Emmanuel’s success. First, Maria has had differing and evolving relationships with her three children that have pivoted largely on how well each has, over time, kept the immigrant bargain—the expectation that children will redeem their immigrant parents’ sacrifice through their own success (Smith 2006; Louie 2004a, 2004b; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). Thor’s educational and career stasis has been juxtaposed against successive triumphs by Emmanuel, whom his older brother Thor has come to see as the favorite son. Each youngster occupied a different role in the family’s psychosocial interior (Handel 1967/1994; Falicov 1998), which affected their subsequent conduct and its meanings. Second, Maria sought to create a positive developmental context for her children by encouraging them to take advantage of outside opportunities and by seeking help for them and herself, even when that was socially stigmatized in her community. Third, and related to the first two, over time...
Maria parented Emmanuel differently than Thor. This was partly because she was willing to risk doing something new with her third child, given her results with the first two—a combined reverse birth order/Cinderella effect (Conley 2004), whereby the oldest child takes adult responsibilities to help the family stay afloat. This creates conflict between the immigrant narrative of hard work to provide for the family and the second-generation narrative of the immigrant bargain (Smith 2006). Emmanuel’s success was also fostered by the iterative trust developed between him and his mother. He kept his immigrant bargain, and she allowed him greater autonomy in making decisions. Thor, Emmanuel’s older brother, was seen as someone who did not keep that bargain and, therefore, had a more limited relationship with Maria.

One element in the psychosocial interior of the family was that Emmanuel was unusually close to his mother and felt her constant support for him. Maria described their relationship as “very communicative” (muy comunicativos). He described how she spoke to him as a “confidante” about “grownup stuff,” including his father. Their close relationship was partly based on the stark juxtaposition of her happiness at his school success and her disappointment at her other children’s failure. Millman (2004) argues that such confidante relationships between a parent and a particular child exclude the other children and complicate sibling relationships. Indeed, Maria had a more conflictive relationship with her oldest child, Eva, and with the middle child, Thor, than with Emmanuel. She fought with Eva over schooling and boys and with Thor over his gang membership and, especially, his dropping out of school. Maria felt the immigrant bargain particularly keenly because she had been made to sacrifice much by her family. With only three years of schooling, she was sent to Mexico City, at age twelve, to work as a domestic. She escaped to New York at sixteen, to work as a live-in in Brooklyn. When Eva graduated high school but did not go to college, and when Thor left high school, Maria faced the prospect that all her sacrifice would be for naught (see Dreby 2007a, 2007b). She became even more determined that Emmanuel would succeed “so that at least one of my children would finish school and do what I could not do.” She also observed that Emmanuel’s academic success is “the biggest gift a child can give his mother” and that his success “is mine too!” Emmanuel understood that he was carrying not only his own dream, but his mother’s, and felt compelled to achieve.8

While Maria celebrated Emmanuel’s school successes, she first fought with Thor over school, and then gave in to and only tolerated his decision to drop out. When he told her about dropping out during junior year, she sought help from the school, which sent a social worker to talk to Thor. When he persisted in his intentions, she eventually assented on the condition that he work and pay rent, which he did. Her relationship with Thor remained distant. Maria reported that from the time Thor was in seventh grade, he has barely spoken to her, never sharing his thoughts or initiating conversation.

The distance between Thor and his mother is as linked to his educational stalling as Emmanuel’s closeness with her is linked to his educational success.9 Thor believes that his mother loved Emmanuel more because “he did his studying . . . he actually was studying and becoming something.” He and Maria did
not “see eye to eye . . . because I didn’t go to school, and [that’s] why I’m working in a restaurant.” Maria tells him, “te estas matando trabajando como un burro” (You are killing yourself working like a donkey). “Instead you could be like your brother working in an office.”

The way that Emmanuel’s mother and siblings talk about their relationships reinforces the immigrant bargain as a central frame for understanding each other. Maria declaratively states that she has loved and treated all her children equally. Yet, it merits note that Thor’s story is rarely framed by anyone in his family, especially his mother, as a sacrifice for his mother and younger brother at a time when they needed financial help. When Thor quit school, Maria was desperately ill, money was tight, and he began making $500 per week, paying $200 toward rent and paying the gas and electric bills, about another $100. However, Thor’s having partially taken on the role of family contributor/provider—the center of the first-generation narrative about working in the United States to give one’s children a better chance—has gone mostly unacknowledged.

Thor’s story is not unique. It describes a Cinderella effect (Conley 2004), set in a migrant context: many older children end up leaving school and working, both to help their parents and to get things their parents cannot afford, but their contribution is often unnoticed. Emmanuel has sometimes acknowledged Thor’s contribution, as when Thor was injured and could not work for a year and Emmanuel paid his brother’s bills, as well as during his speech at his law school graduation party when he publicly thanked Thor for his support as they were growing up as the “father figure I never had.” However, by and large, Thor’s life is more often discussed in relation to his dropping out of school.

Another factor in Emmanuel’s success was that, as third child, he benefited from his mother’s experience with the two older children. While Maria just let the other two go to the local high school, she told Emmanuel to investigate options with his guidance counselor and to go to a different school to avoid the problems his brother and cousins had. This change, which Emmanuel saw as a turning point in his successful school career, also signaled a shift in Maria’s parenting from a hands-off style regarding schooling to trying to more actively shape the contexts within which Emmanuel would move. Maria also increasingly grew to trust Emmanuel’s judgment and depended on him to help cultivate opportunities to attend special programs or schools.

Maria gradually developed what can be described as a more authoritative parenting approach with regard to Emmanuel, which has been shown to correlate with greater educational success. She did not quite engage in the “concerted cultivation” that Lareau (2003) observed among middle-class parents, but she did the best she could in seeking out opportunities for Emmanuel and in giving him permission to explore and accept such opportunities. This stands in contrast to many Mexican parents who urge their children to go to familiar schools, attended by cousins, and closer to home (Smith 2006), in the belief that there is safety in numbers and that a school with too many African Americans and Puerto Ricans will negatively affect their children. Maria tried to get help for Thor, but he would not accept it or talk to her about his decision, thus making it hard to pursue a
modified version of concerted cultivation or authoritative parenting. Studies of parenting strategies often presuppose a close relationship between child and parent. In addition, authoritative parenting may be easier in neighborhoods and families where parents have more resources (Furstenberg et al. 1999).

Maria went beyond seeking support for her children. When she noticed that she was yelling at her children for little reason, was sad and nervous, and had trouble sleeping, she consulted her doctor, who prescribed therapy for her anxiety and depression. That Maria was willing to go beyond the accepted kinds of support and get psychological help showed great courage; it also aided Emmanuel’s upward mobility by allowing him to live in a household with a better-functioning parent. Similarly, Maria overcame her own fear and others’ chisme (gossip) that Emmanuel risked becoming, in his words, “a drug addict and alcoholic” if he were to live away at Elite University. She made a deal that he could live at college if he came home on the weekends, which he did through sophomore year. That she was willing to trust him enough to go away, but put conditions on her assent, bespeaks an iterative process by which her relationship with Emmanuel changed. Each time he kept his promises, she trusted him more; each time he moved into a new world, she deferred to him more.

This history points to the importance of the constructed developmental context in which children of immigrants grow up and the evolving relationship of each person’s role in the psychosocial interior of the family. Emmanuel benefited from a kind of reverse birth order effect, wherein his mother had learned from the negative outcomes with her first two children and was willing to try a different approach with the third. He also benefited from the close relationship with his mother and his role as the favorite who had kept the immigrant bargain. Moreover, the iterative pattern of her extension of trust in his judgment and his subsequent success reinforced this role for him, leading her to parent him differently, and leading him to intensify his desire to succeed and redeem her sacrifices. Thor’s relationships with his mother and brother are both more limited in their interaction and less changed, as they continue to be defined by his more modest keeping of the immigrant bargain. The psychology of the immigrant bargain changed as Emmanuel grew older, because Maria was very invested in his success but had no such expectations for Thor’s or Eva’s keeping of the immigrant bargain. Finally, Maria’s defiance of stigma and chisme in seeking treatment and in letting Emmanuel live away at college also created a supportive context for his academic success and for her ability to negotiate her difficult life circumstances.

These internal family dynamics engage interestingly with segmented assimilation theory, which predicts dissonant acculturation for children of Mexican immigrants as their parents’ exhortations to work contradicts their own difficult lives. Thor does drop out of school and engage in inner-city behavior. But he also works very hard and helps support his family, feels it is possible to get ahead in America, and does not feel American society will limit his future because he is Mexican. He is a cross between a U.S.-identified youth, who acts oppositionally and feels racism limits him personally, and an immigrant-identified youth, who believes
that one can get ahead with hard work, despite the presence of racism in American society (Waters 1994, 1999, 1996).

Emmanuel’s case is an exception to segmented assimilation theory and requires alternative concepts to explicate. His keeping of the immigrant bargain and its increasing importance for Maria changes the emotional center of gravity in the family. This special bond means that Emmanuel has greater freedom and support to seek out new opportunities and move into new social arenas to increase his upward mobility. For her part, Maria does not quite do the “concerted cultivation” of middle-class parents, but she does seek out opportunities and backing to create a positive developmental context for her children and herself.

**Belonging in Different Worlds: Socially Neutral Operating Identities**

In *Asylums*, Erving Goffman (1961) focused on how institutions strip inmates of old social identities and form institutional ones (e.g., as inmates); while in his book on the presentation of self in everyday life (1959), he focused on how people seek to maintain a social sense of themselves as conforming to expected roles, forming the social self in interaction. Goffman’s writing on stigma (1963) emphasized the interaction between the normal and the stigmatized, showing how those who are stigmatized can pass as normal if they can conceal the flow of discrediting information and perform as normal people.12

Goffman’s work is useful in understanding how Emmanuel has succeeded in fashioning social identities and practices that have enabled him to fit into various social worlds and keep them separate. To understand this behavior, I posit the development of several relatively stable social identities and the critical negotiation of the boundaries between social worlds. The notion of “socially neutral operating identity” describes how people forge several social identities: some people are better at developing and deploying these than others. Most theories of social identity seek to understand and often measure how ethnic identity affects other outcomes, but make a Peter Pan–like assumption (Myers 2007) that this effect is relatively constant across contexts and over time. This is a problem in how segmented assimilation treats culture; it captures behavior among adolescents and projects its continuation into the future (Smith 2006; see Waldinger and Feliciano [2004] for a related critique). I argue that in the case of low-income overachievers, different identities, some ethnic and some not, will become operating self-definitions in some contexts and at different times. Emmanuel sought to deploy operating identities that were socially neutral in different contexts.

A socially neutral operating identity may be crafted by using three basic practices. The first practice, conceptualized through Emmanuel’s own words and by invoking Goffman, might be called *doing the work*, that is, taking the actions needed to have one’s imagined social self correspond to one’s actual social self.
The second practice borrows from the psychological concept of categorization, defined as the “process of understanding what some thing is by knowing what other things it is equivalent to and what other things it is different from” (Oakes 2004, citing McGarty 1999); such categorization serves as a guide or map for further social action (Tajfel 1978), helping us to define who we are in given situations by who we are not. The third practice involves the psychological concept of priming (Crocker and Quinn 2004) in which certain cues invoke particular stereotypes. For example, African American students have been found to perform better on tests when they are primed by being told the purpose of the test is to better understand problem solving than when the goal is explained as gauging their ability. Emmanuel used all three of these practices in pursuing his socially neutral path to success.

“Doing the work” of each of a number of worlds involves the ability to perceive what it takes to fit in and succeed and the self-discipline to accomplish it. For his school world, Emmanuel did his class work and his homework and rarely cut classes, behavior that put him severely at odds with that of many other boys in my data set. (In fact, some boys I interviewed and shadowed said, “I don’t believe in homework.” They told me that they spent “all day in school,” and that this should be enough, and they did not see teachers as having any right to tell them what to do after they left school.) Emmanuel also did the work of the X Street gang. He played basketball all day on Saturdays and in games on Sundays, hung out with the gang on the street, gave “hard looks” to youth who they felt should not be on their street, and even participated in some fights. Yet, even while spending all this time as a “gangsta,” Emmanuel took steps to ensure that his involvement with his more hardcore cousins did not get him into serious trouble that could hurt his educational career. He never carried a weapon, in case he was stopped by the police. He did not seek out conflict, as some did, but rather sought only to be “hard enough” (Dance 2002) to make it no fun to mess with him and project an image consistent with the rest of the boys. After age seventeen, Emmanuel became very selective about the kinds of public settings he would enter and regulated his risk by carefully choosing who he would stand or sit with inside parties. He avoided the “crazier” X Street gang members or their friends so he could not be dragged into fights by his proximity to them.

In similar fashion, Emmanuel did his schoolwork in ways that helped him avoid the potential entanglements that uncontrolled public space might force on him. Emmanuel never ate lunch in high school. Instead, he would “use that time to do my homework . . . it got me ready for classes. . . . Also, to avoid problems, I just stayed upstairs” in the library. In so doing, he avoided potential problems: “People get picked on in the lunchroom . . . they take your milk . . . if you’re not with your friends, you are a likely target.” In theoretical terms, Emmanuel strategically chose to avoid arenas in which he was less able to control the social construction of his operating identity.

This logic can be seen in his response to a confrontation with a black youth who was “talking trash” to him during gym class and provoking him further in the
locker room while he was changing. He spoke back to the youth at first but then reconsidered. “He was there with his boys . . . I knew that if I was to fight I was gonna get jumped. . . . If I called my boys, it was gonna escalate. That was what went through my mind.” In the end, he felt he was alone and should “just cut my losses. . . . I just got dressed, closed the locker, and just left.” This was very hard for him, because he felt like a “Herb”—a man who would not fight to defend his honor, no matter what the circumstances.

In general, Emmanuel tried to pursue an invisible course in high school and in college, explaining, “In my first two years, I had no friends . . . only my boy Manuel [one of the three Mexicans in the school] . . . . I wanted to maintain my smartness, but avoid the backlash . . . of being picked on because I was smart.” He said that he also wanted to project the “the image of a cool guy . . . dressing baggy . . . a cholo.” He recognized that other smart kids in his school, or “dweebs” who were not “cool,” got picked on, in part for dressing in “very tight jeans.” When Emmanuel dressed cool, he hid his smartness by being imperceptible in his classes, without being oppositional toward his teachers: “I never raised my hand. If a teacher called on me, I would respond, but not participate. . . . I never spoke in class . . . that was the only way I could hide [being smart].” He aimed to “maintain the image of being cool but intelligent at the same time” and did not seek to intimidate with his toughness—no hard stares or “grilling.” In other words, Emmanuel tried to remain invisible in high school by avoiding priming the wrong social categories. His path did not forsake either the cholo or the mainstream notions of manhood. This strategy, of being “tough enough [for them] to leave me alone . . . but not so tough to provoke a fight,” has been documented in other work (e.g., Dance 2002; Anderson 1978, 1999; Carter 2004).

While Emmanuel adapted the same policy at Elite University, here he found that his old habits of invisibility did not work. While he was pleased when his Mexican friend at the university told him that he was “the truest gangsta at Elite,” he also felt that “if I want to be taken serious and succeed and assimilate to that community, I had to change my image,” by which he meant “to change my style to fit in and be accepted.” Although he never “went native” or stopped feeling Mexican, he always saw himself as “the odd man out” at Elite, in part because he had never been around so many white people before. He created his “own clique” at Elite, only feeling at home with his “boys” who were other Mexican or Latino students, and he never withdrew entirely from his X Street friends. At the same time, he wore “tighter jeans” and dressed “less cholo” at Elite to help restore his invisibility. In another realm, the classroom, he found that his silence in classes—rather than positively showing him as an attentive student who made no trouble, as in high school—counted against him. Participation was expected, and his silence hurt his grades at first. He also had what he called a “rude awakening” when he received a C in his first-semester calculus class, a subject in which he had received an A in high school. He had also scored in the 99th percentile in standardized math tests. But he quietly worked harder, forced himself to participate, and achieved better results. By the time he went to law school and started working in a law firm, he knew how to fit into a white elite world. He also found his fluency in Spanish to be an asset because he often worked with immigrant clients.
Emmanuel’s pattern of assiduous maintenance of the separation of his X Street life and his academic life broke only once in any substantive way. During his first year at Elite, he and Ramon, whom he also described as “my boy,” were verbally confronted in the dining hall by a large number of black students. They walked away from the incident but were followed onto the street by the black students. Emmanuel said, “Ramon, let’s walk away.” As they were leaving, “a kid kicked Ramon in the back.” Their failure to respond brought taunts by the black students, who threatened to get him and Ramon later. As soon as they were out of danger, Emmanuel called his Mexican friends, and in less than an hour, they went to the dorm to confront the black youth, who, in turn, called Elite University Security. Up until this point, Emmanuel had taken a cue from the X Street code of conduct (Anderson 1999) and used it inside the walls of Elite’s campus, allowing his anger to overcome his better judgment and threatening to undo all his hard work.

Yet, throughout this whole episode, Emmanuel also attempted to manage the incursion of X Street into his academic world to minimize the consequences. When some of his friends showed up with baseball bats, he told them to leave them in their cars. When he saw one of the students calling security and noticed one in his group had brought a bat despite his entreaties, he told them that they should leave right away and said he would treat them to hotdogs at a place around the corner to quickly lead them off campus. He had also called another student at Elite, who warned him against this dangerous course, telling him he “could get kicked out” of school. He concluded that “if I would bring X Street into Elite, no good would come of it” and it could have “catastrophic consequences.” He also worried that real harm would be done to the black students. He was leading his brother and friends off campus when they were stopped by Elite Security.

The next day, Emmanuel and Ramon had to surrender their Elite University IDs, with their return contingent upon the outcome of their talks with the dean. Emmanuel changed a crucial detail of his story; instead of saying that he had asked his brother and friends to come to campus, he said that he had just told his brother of the incident, and they had then shown up on their own. He then reported how he had tried to avoid a conflict by leading the others away from campus. The security guards confirmed his version, “making my story more credible.” He rationalized, saying, “If I [invited them on campus], I woulda been responsible, and gotten kicked out. It woulda ruined by future . . . it had taken a lot to get there.” He also believed he would not get any second chances, saying that he felt he had “two strikes against me; I’m Spanish at a prestigious university . . . they expect more from me.” He elaborated, saying that he thought that whereas white students who had “a lot of money” would get a second chance if they did something “stupid,” he would not be given that second opportunity.

Emmanuel explained that in telling the dean that he had only informed his brother of the prior attack, and leading him and the others away from conflict, he was invoking an image of himself as a “peacemaker.” He thus primed the dean with the image of a striving Latino child trying to escape the rough crowd he had
grown up with and defined his social self as morally worthy. Had he admitted that he had invited his crew to campus, he would have primed for the dean the image of a dangerous Latino gang member who was not fit to be a student at Elite University. This priming is a way to mobilize particular images about Latinos—and thereby avoid mobilizing other images—so that the observer places Emmanuel in the “right” category, as a Latino of moral value, worth taking a chance on, and one who is likely to make that chance pay off.

Discussion and Conclusion

Ragin’s (2000) theory of the fuzzy set social science provides a useful framework for explaining how it is possible to classify cases such as Emmanuel's by showing how they fit into more than one category and to varying degrees. Figure 1 shows what I call Emmanuel's Fuzzy Set Social Locator, indicating four different subcultural groups into which Emmanuel fits to different degrees: rainbow underclass, upper-middle-class society, second-generation striver, and first-generation immigrant. Each is an idealized version of its subcultural group, and some elements can overlap between groups. Moreover, both simultaneous memberships and degrees of membership are possible. (A set of traits describing that subcultural group is listed under each heading; traits italicized indicate that Emmanuel or Thor possess that trait.)

Using this logic, Emmanuel's prior active membership in the X Street Crew and his current friendships with others from the Crew would give him partial membership in the rainbow underclass. This membership becomes more partial over time, because Emmanuel stops being a regular X Street Crew member in his late teens. His closest friends and some cousins, as former X Streeters, live in the long wake of their X Street membership, fearing to ride public transportation, being wanted for questioning or arrested by the police when crimes are committed (even if, in their account, they are not involved), and facing the hard labor markets for those who have not gone to college. Emmanuel has avoided most of the problems associated with the rainbow underclass, such as dropping out of school, irregular work, dissonant acculturation, and a racialized meaning to being Mexican.

At the same time, Emmanuel has a partial but growing membership in upper-middle-class society in New York. He has learned how to act in institutional settings such as law firms and universities, he has excellent educational credentials and a good job, and he has avoided parenthood and marriage until after he has finished his education. He also fits partially into the first-generation immigrant category by virtue of his prizing hard work. His strongest fit is in the second-generation striver category: while he has finished his education through law school, he has kept the immigrant bargain well, is recognized for having done so, and has delayed marriage and parenthood. He is also ethnically Mexican, meaning that he identifies as Mexican but that ethnicity does not dominate or significantly structure all his relationships and interactions.
Thor’s Fuzzy Set Social Locator (Figure 2) also reveals simultaneous memberships. He fits into the rainbow underclass set because of his long-term membership in the X Street Crew, his conflictive relationship with his mother over the immigrant bargain, and his primary friendships with other former or current members of it. (However, like Emmanuel, he no longer actively hangs out with the Crew, though he sometimes hangs out on the block.) However, he fits into the first-generation immigrant category because he works hard, took a job instead of going to school, and has sacrificed for his younger sibling by working to help support the family. He fits into the second-generation striver category only by his delay of marriage and parenthood and the upper-middle-class society category only tangentially by his being able to negotiate at all.

Thor’s composite suggests the need for another category—second-generation youth who struggle within first-generation constraints, in part because of their own earlier choices, but who have not given up. Many second-generation youth in my data set have not finished school, but most work very hard and consistently, although in “immigrant” jobs, such as in restaurants. Most feel that they have either failed their parents and/or that their successes and sacrifices are not properly recognized, because they have not kept the immigrant bargain in the way the parents have expected them to—by finishing school, getting a career, and then marrying and having a family. They are stuck between competing roles.

NOTE: Characteristics in italics describe Emmanuel.
We can also understand this conflict over the keeping of the immigrant bargain as a dispute over a Goffmanian moral career (1961) that is involved in the transition to early adulthood. The parents have a set of steps they conceive of their children taking at certain times, but their adolescent and then young adult children often diverge from their expected path. Moreover, the set of steps the parents expect are sometimes contradictory—for example, needing and accepting help with the household budget, but still feeling like the adult child has fallen short by not finishing school and getting a career. From the adult children’s perspective, it is very hard to both help your siblings keep the immigrant bargain and keep it yourself.

However, Thor and others like him are also not permanently oppositional in the way that segmented assimilation seems to imagine them by virtue of their rainbow underclass adolescence. Most work hard and continue to believe that the United States is a land of opportunity for those who try hard, that they will get ahead in time, and that being Mexican is not an obstacle to them. As they move into early adulthood, they abandon, for the most part, gang and/or criminal activity, but they now must strive to succeed within the limits their earlier decisions have placed upon them (as segmented assimilation theory would argue). They are stuck in the immigrant labor market because they have not finished school, but
they do not inhabit this space with an opposition to the American mainstream. Rather, they continue to seek a way into that mainstream and believe they can get it if they continue to try hard, and they wish to give their own children better opportunities.

Moreover, some second-generation youth in immigrant jobs benefit from being in the immigrant labor market—they are citizens and can work on the books—and they speak both languages and hence are useful to employers within the firm’s internal labor market. Many end up making solidly (lower) middle-class salaries but have little job security. The only silver lining is that there is significant demand for them because of the particular niche they occupy—they serve as translators and brokers between their coethnic immigrant fellow employees and their common, non-Mexican, employers. Moreover, some move into the immigrant economy as self-employed entrepreneurs, opening stores selling immigrant goods or services (e.g., remittances) or their own restaurants.

Emmanuel’s exceptional success was made possible in significant part by the public and private programs to which he gained access in school, which identified him from an early age and fast-tracked him into other programs with more resources and fewer conflicts that might derail academic success. Significantly, these programs do not represent a general commitment to educational excellence for all students by the public school system but, rather, a targeted extra investment in the most talented. Emmanuel’s exceptional success was also the result of his own skillful negotiation of the several social worlds he inhabited, some simultaneously and others in sequence, as he pursued his schooling and work.

The second-generation advantage theory (Kasinitz et al. 2008) posits that youth pick and choose behaviors from both their parents and the native cultures they encounter. For example, they live with their parents into early adulthood, saving money and making it possible to afford school, but they dress in native hip-hop-style clothes. This reality sits badly with segmented assimilation’s argument that native, inner-city culture will cause downward mobility. However, viewing Emmanuel’s movement through his life as a sequence of choices between culturally distinct alternatives—for example, immigrant versus inner-city native—does not completely capture the process leading to his success. The notion of choice must be made more contextual, cumulative, and dynamic. Emmanuel chose well, in the main, from the options presented to him in each of these social worlds. The choices he made were not primarily cultural. His environment presented him with a finite set of options at each juncture, and his choices opened some doors and closed others. His decision to attend a different high school was the result of his own and his mother’s and family’s negative experience with the local high school and the desire to isolate him from the negative effects his Mexican cousins would have had on his school career. His decision to “stop hanging out” so much during his junior year in high school was due to his realization that getting arrested would endanger his chances to go to college and get a scholarship. Hence, Emmanuel’s dramatic upward mobility is produced through the special programs he is given (and takes) the chance to study in and his being offered, and accepting, the
guidance of very dedicated mentors. Each program offered more opportunity than regular school and opened more doors, in a cumulatively causal fashion.

Second, Emmanuel benefits from his status as favorite son, as the third child, and as the best keeper of the immigrant bargain. The close relationship between Emmanuel and Maria, and her strong emotional investment in his success, made it even more urgent for him to succeed and redeem his mother’s sacrifice, and it made her willing to try a different approach to his schooling. This closeness was constantly juxtaposed with the more distant and limited relationship between Thor and his mother, who lived in a house where he was defined by contrast with his more successful brother. The closer relationship between Maria and Emmanuel made it easier for him to make good choices.

Third, Emmanuel’s dramatic ascent is accomplished by his own ability to develop socially neutral operating identities in the several contexts through which his climb takes him. He is able to negotiate potential confrontations within gang-charged settings in ways that do not redound to him, or to strategically distance or absent himself from such conflicts. He also is able to perceive how to simultaneously project the image to other students in high school that he is tough enough but to his teachers that his silence hides determination and brains. Upon moving to Elite University, he adapts to the new rules and thrives there as well, despite his one critical misstep of bringing X Street to campus. Yet, even his management of that misstep, by changing one detail in the story to project a better image of himself, speaks to his ability to develop socially neutral (here, positive) operating identities.

In conclusion, Emmanuel’s extraordinary success underlines the importance of focusing inquiry on areas that have not been used as main explanatory factors for upward or downward mobility in most research on the second generation. Public and private support for exceptional students—“the savable tenth”—and good mentoring are key factors creating better educational and career trajectories. Such programs create social capital and link students to schools with better resources and, critically, with stronger links to college. Such schools function more like the private or high-end public schools that actively create bridges to college and convey expectations that students will go, and less like terminal educational institutions that do not function as bridges to anything in particular (Hill 2008).

Intrafamily dynamics, including the keeping of the immigrant bargain and one’s role within the family, matter in promoting the success of some children of immigrants more than others. The increased emotional investment and more flexible and more involved childrearing practices Maria showed toward Emmanuel were important psychosocial facilitators of his educational success. Similarly, Thor’s experience of his place in the family as the guy who did not do as well as his brother has contributed to the stasis in his relationships within the family. But it is Emmanuel’s skillful negotiation of the variety of social worlds he had to negotiate that can be seen as the grease in the machine, the lubricant that made the pieces fitting his various worlds together work smoothly together.
Notes

1. All subjects are identified by pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

2. Horatio Alger, Jr. is famous for writing stories of young boys who begin with few resources but escape poverty.


4. Alba and Nee’s (2003) horizontal mobility led me to the notion of shallow slope mobility, which differs only in degree.

5. I have provided Emmanuel encouragement over the nearly ten years I have known him, but he was already on an upward path when I met him. I do not see a huge Hawthorne effect here.

6. DuBois talked about educating through the “talented tenth” of blacks in the postbellum period to create a kind of vanguard for the development of the black race. The common wisdom at the time echoes with the sentiment held by many today that most students in the schools will not amount to anything. I still think the public school system can do better for all students.

7. I focus primarily on Emmanuel and Thor, because Eva left the house young to marry, and because Thor and Emmanuel are less than a year apart and their courses are constantly juxtaposed.

8. Vivian Louie’s (2004b) work on Chinese students who are compelled to excel offers an interesting comparison.

9. These outcomes are not her “fault,” but they are causally linked by the actions of all the actors.

10. The literature on parenting differentiates between different styles of parenting and their children’s success in school and life. Of the four ideal-types of parenting—indulgent, uninvolved, authoritarian, and authoritative—authoritative parenting promotes success best. See, for example, Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein’s 2007 book, Raising a Self-Disciplined Child: Help Your Child to Become More Responsible.

11. Eva kept the immigrant bargain a little better by graduating high school, but she got married and had children without going to college. Like Thor’s, her path resonates with a first-generation narrative. Young women often run away with or move in with their new husbands. Maria herself “ran off” against her parents’ wishes.

12. Writing in the late 1950s, Erving Goffman analyzed the interactions between the “normals” and the “stigmatized” and how the latter could, for example, pass as normals if their spoiled identity (e.g., homosexual) could be concealed.

References


