The dynamics of cultural assimilation in an immigrant society

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We introduce an innovative approach based on first names given to immigrant children to examine the cultural assimilation of immigrants in Israel from 1948-2008, a period during which exceptionally large and diverse waves of migrants arrived in Israel. Despite the centrality of cultural assimilation in models of migrant incorporation in host societies (Alba and Nee 2005; Waters and Jiménez 2005), the core aspect of individual cultural identity remains largely unmeasured in the literature, making it virtually impossible to understand how ethnic identity is transformed as well as the role played by structural factors like employment opportunities in the assimilation process. Thus, the focus in the empirical literature has shifted towards more readily available indicators of structural assimilation including education, occupation, and income, commonly collected in traditional data collection efforts such as surveys and the census. Yet, these outcomes, which depend themselves on cultural processes, tell us little regarding individual decisions in the course of migration, primarily because they themselves depend on the many constraints faced by immigrants. These debates are particularly salient in the case of Israel, where unparalleled waves of immigrants arrived in a short period beginning in the early 1950s, originating in very distinct and differentiated cultures, and arriving in a state heavily imbued with a melting pot ideology targeting the socialization of immigrants to the cultural, ideological and social habitus of the senior absorbing society (Hacohen 2003). Our project examines the Israeli case to shed light on the patterns of processes of cultural assimilation from a new perspective – one that is statistically based and founded on explicit choices parents make in choosing between traditional identities and incorporation into host societies.

Cultural assimilation remains highly contested – from its definition through to policy and academic debates on its implications (Huntington 2004; Portes and Borocz 1989; White and Glick 2009). For our purpose, we adopt a simple definition of cultural assimilation that refers to the "decline of an ethnic distinction between two groups" (Alba and Nee 2005). To measure this declining distinction between groups, we argue that a cultural marker is needed that reflects language and custom as well as subjective identity. Our research builds on the use of first names given to children, which are purely cultural objects bearing no direct monetary costs. The freedom of choice of first names makes them a powerful indicator of the cultural dimensions of assimilation. We argue that first names given to children provide a unique "window into parental visions of the ethnic identity of their children…" (Sue and Telles 2007:1385). They inform us on how parents face the trade-off between the desire to transmit their own traditions and to reproduce their ethnic identity in the next generation while still providing their children with identities that maximize their chances of success in their new homeland (Gerhards and Hans 2009).

First name choices by parents present a different perspective from other common measures of assimilation, which are either highly constrained such as residence or occupation or serve other instrumental functions such as language acquisition. Moreover, using names provides a distinct advantage in terms of data quality. First data typically gathered in the census are constrained by state categories and classifications. Names, in contrast, are "string" values and offer unique flexibility for persons to express individual value in ethnic identity. Second, the cultural affiliation of names is continuous, with some names lying closer to one group than another – unlike language, which has only a coarse classification. Finally, while names can be changed, they are *relatively* stable compared to other assimilation measures such as language and residence.

We intend to focus in this paper on four specific questions **(1)** does increased time in Israeli society affect whether parents to choose *less* ethnically distinct names for children and are there differences in the pace of this process across groups; **(2)** is there evidence that parents already chose *less* ethnically distinctive names prior to migrating; **(3)** is there a difference in the rates at which higher and lower socioeconomic groups assimilate culturally; and **(4)** can we identify impacts turning points that accelerate or decelerate the pace of cultural assimilation across groups.

Our analysis builds on several data sources: but particularly the population census of Israel for years 1972, 1983, 1995 and 2008 and the current population registry. The registry provides current data on the entire living or deceased population of Israel including first names. Socioeconomic data are obtained by linking census files and registry data using unique personal ID numbers, which are available across the data file types.

We focus on several distinct population groups in the main portion of our analyses. Our analysis is focused on children born in Israel and our groups are defined according to the birthplace of the father of the children. At this first stage, we also focus primarily on sons although later we incorporate daughters as well. Our first group is native Israelis – that is children born to parents after 1948 that are themselves Israeli-born. Our immigrant groups include children born in Israel after 1948 to parents from Romania, Morocco, Yemen and Iraq – thus the populations from the first of the large waves that shaped Israeli society in the early years and onwards.

The results of Table 1 show the top 10 names for the children born in Israel from parents born in countries included as our main ethnic groups. The results are interesting and illustrate the large shifts in names that occurred in under two decades (13 years for the Moroccans) in names given to new born boys in Israel. Several names appear repeatedly across the groups. But what stands out is that for some groups, few of the names popular at the period of arrival are present at all by 1970.

Table 1. Top Ten Names for Boys from Main Immigrant Ethnic Groups (translated from Hebrew), from Start of Migration Waves to 1970 (Based on 2013 Israeli Population Registry).

	Iraq		Yemen		Morocco		Romania	
	1952	1970	1952	1970	1957	1970	1952	1970
1	David	Yosef	Zion	Ronen	Meir	Ilan	Moshe	Yosef
2	Herzel	Moshe	Yosef	Yaniv	Shimon	Moshe	Avraham	Ronen
3	Yaacov	Reuven	Itzhak	Eitan	David	David	Haim	Sharon
4	Yosef	David	Moshe	Alon	Zion	Itzhak	Yosef	Ilan
5	Moshe	Itzhak	Rehamim	Ilan	Avraham	Avraham	Yaacov	Amir
6	Eliahu	Avraham	Mordechai	Yaron	Eliahu	Yosef	Itzhak	Ran
7	Haim	Ilan	Shlomo	Oren	Yosef	Yaacov	Mordechai	Tal
8	Itzhak	Yaacov	Yehuda	Yosef	Yaacov	Yigal	Zvi	David
9	Shlomo	Alon	Shmuel	Ofer	Shlomo	Haim	Arieh	Shai
10	Avraham	Eliahu	Meir	Erez	Moshe	Shlomo	David	Asaf

Our methodology relies on estimation of a quantitative indicator of cultural affiliation based on first names. This indicator measures the degree of ethnic distinctiveness of first names of children of immigrants relative to natives. The ethnic distinctiveness of names are computed from the relative frequency of each name in a given ethic group compared to the frequency in the native population. The ethnic name index (ENI) for any name and a given group, is defined as the proportion of children with a given name born to parents in group *m* divided by this same quantity plus the proportion of children with this same name born to native parents:
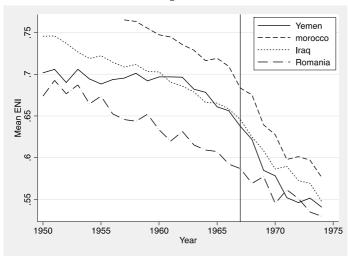
$$ENI = \frac{P(name|group_m)}{P(name|group_m) + P(name|native)} \qquad (1)$$

This simple and easily interpretable formulation was introduced for the analysis of black names by Levitt and Fryer (2004) and was adapted for analysis of assimilation in America (Goldstein and Stecklov 2013). A value of zero for the index means that a given name is absent among migrant group *m* and present in the native population. A value of one means the name is exclusive to the ethnic group and absent in the native population. While *ENI* can be calculated based only on young children, we chose here to allow *ENI* to reflect the breadth of names observed by new immigrants among native relative to the names present within their own ethnic group. Separate *ENI* scores are calculated for each immigrant group relative to the native population. The *ENI* is calculated beginning as early as 1948 using names of all people alive in the country between 1948 and 1970, identified in the registry of 2013 (the registry also includes names of people deceased between 1970 and 2013). Once *ENI*

scores are calculated for each name, the scores are assigned to children born to parents in Israel based on their ethnic group and name, and these scores form the basis of our subsequent analysis.

The first stage in our analysis is to use the data on first names for each group and to calculate *ENI* scores. The results of these calculations enable us to examine aggregate shifts in *ENI* scores over time for each ethnic group, $\overline{ENI_m}$, over the years of our study. Our first preliminary steps already show a unique pattern as seen in Figure 1. We show here evidence of impressive cultural assimilation as children born to fathers from each of four large immigrant cohorts, Iraq, Yemen, Morocco and Romania, all show impressive convergence towards Israeli native cultural identities over the period from arrival through to 1974.

Figure 1. Mean ENI for births in Israel 1950-1974 by origin of immigrant father arriving in 1948-1951 waves from Iraq, Yemen and Romania

Several key features are worth noting. One is that all groups were quite ethnically distinctive upon their arrival with Iraqis and Moroccans potentially showing slightly less distance in the earlier years from native Israelis. Second, all groups converged over the course of the first decade or so towards natives although the Romanians appear to have converged more quickly which is not unsurprising given the fact that their European origin made them more similar to the Ashkenazi elite residing in Israel at the time and dominating society. Finally, there is some suggestion in the data, though this needs to be tested more formally, that following the 1967 war the page of assimilation picked up. A line is drawn for 1967 to facilitate identifying this period. The pace of decline for some of the groups may be quicker following the war, which is consistent with arguments in the literature on the role of the expansion of the state's boundaries and the rapid victory over opposing forces in the war having created a turning point. Following the war, two additional conflicting forces were brought to bear. On the one hand an enhanced idealization of the Israeli identity and on the other hand an increasing openness towards ethnic and cultural identification (Smooha 2004).

The second stage of our analysis focuses both on measurement of temporal patterns of cultural assimilation using *ENI* and evaluation of how these patterns vary across different cohorts, classes and ethnic groups. Our models build on key features of the data, that are possible when we link data from the population registry with census data. We focus on the role of cultural assimilation as a determinant of the shift in naming by examining how *ENI* changes by birth order within families over time in Israel. One restriction inherent in this approach is the requirement for data on multiple children within families. Where childbearing levels are lower, we use a subset of families with higher fertility as well as compare the FE estimates to traditional OLS models on all families. The basic model utilized in this set of analyses is shown as a traditional FE model estimated only on immigrants,

$$ENI_{ij} = \alpha + \gamma \cdot X_{ij} + \tau \cdot Z_j + \tau \cdot TIME_{ij} + u_j + e_{ij} \qquad (2)$$

where *ENI$_{ij}$* refers to ethnic name distinctiveness of person *i* in family *j*, *X* refers to a series of control variables at the individual level and Z are controls at the household level. Further controls for birth order should also be included and the variable *TIME* captures years since immigration. The error term

is shown both as a family component, u_j, and an individual component, e_{ij}. The coefficient τ provides the estimate for how the *ENI* score within a family is changing as time in Israel increases. This specification is flexible and allows for gender or country of origin to be included both separately and as interactions to see if time in Israel affects *ENI* differently by sex or for different immigrant groups.

Our research into cultural assimilation of immigrants within Israel has important consequences for understanding the economic and social trajectories of immigrants. According to the traditional view, cultural assimilation tends to go hand-in-hand with other dimensions of economic and social integration. In contrast, the countering view suggests that maintenance of cultural identity and distinctiveness can be advantageous in certain circumstances. We aim to shed light on this process by offering a new approach, which necessitates only traditional cross-sectional data, but offers insight onto the temporal process of cultural change within families. This perspective can help show how acculturation occurs among dissimilar ethnicities, when it might begin, or why it might stagnate.

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