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Title: **Beyond Assimilation: Success and Belonging among Portuguese Descendants in the U.S.**

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Extended Abstract

The long-term consequences of migration unfold across generations, yet most research on incorporation in the United States continues to focus on immigrants rather than their descendants. Often grouped under the broad category of European-origin populations, Portuguese-Americans remain analytically invisible despite more than a century of presence. Their experience challenges the assumption that European-origin guarantees linear assimilation or uniform success. This study revisits theories of incorporation by examining the socioeconomic and cultural trajectories of second-generation and beyond Portuguese descendants in the U.S., drawing on recent demographic data and new empirical analyses. By comparing patterns of success and belonging across groups, we propose a more nuanced understanding of integration that moves beyond the traditional assimilation paradigm.

Classical assimilation theory, conceptualizes integration as an unidirectional process in which immigrant groups gradually converge with the socioeconomic and cultural mainstream. Success, in this view, is measured by the erosion of difference—educational parity, linguistic shift, and occupational convergence (Alba & Nee, 2003). However, subsequent approaches such as segmented assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993) questioned the inevitability of this trajectory, arguing that outcomes depend on parental human capital, community support, and the racialized structure of opportunity. Later developments—particularly in integration and acculturation theories (Berry, 1997; Sam & Berry, 2010)—introduced reciprocal and multidimensional perspectives that recognize cultural retention, bicultural competence, and hybrid forms of belonging. The Portuguese-American case

provides a particularly suitable context for evaluating these competing models, precisely because it challenges the simple dichotomy between assimilation and cultural retention.

Our analysis combines microdata from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series – Current Population Survey (IPUMS-CPS, 2018–2023) and the American Community Survey (ACS, 2018–2023). These datasets allow for detailed comparisons between Portuguese descendants and other second-generation European-origin groups, using indicators of education, income, employment, well-being, and overall socioeconomic status. Language use within households—Portuguese-speaking vs. non-Portuguese-speaking descendants—is treated as a key marker of cultural retention and potential intergenerational transmission. Multivariate regression models were estimated controlling for age, gender, educational attainment, occupational type, and regional distribution, revealing significant differences in outcomes between Portuguese speakers and non-speakers, as well as across U.S. states.

Findings suggest that Portuguese descendants occupy a distinctive position in the stratification hierarchy of European-origin groups. On average, Portuguese Americans report slightly higher median wages (approximately 7% above the general U.S. population), but the variation across states is substantial. Educational attainment ranges from 18.5% with a university degree in Hawaii to 47.5% in New York (Tavares, 2025). States with stronger Portuguese ethnic infrastructures, such as Massachusetts and California, show both higher socioeconomic outcomes and stronger indicators of cultural retention. This pattern supports a model closer to selective acculturation rather than full assimilation: the maintenance of cultural and linguistic ties appears to coexist with economic mobility rather than impede it.

Demographically, the community exhibits dual dynamics of aging and renewal. Between 2013–2017 and 2018–2022, the overall Portuguese-American population aged, yet Portuguese-speaking descendants remain, on average, three to four years younger than non-speakers (Azevedo & Singh, 2025). This age gap indicates generational renewal among bilingual descendants and suggests that cultural continuity may now be associated with younger cohorts. Such findings contradict the expectation that language retention declines automatically with time in the host society. Instead, they point to a revitalization of cultural identity, potentially reflecting both the global revalorization of bilingualism and the positive international image of Portugal in the 21st century.

Regression estimations further confirm that Portuguese-speaking status has no negative effect on economic outcomes once education and occupation are controlled for. On the

contrary, the combination of higher educational attainment and preserved cultural capital correlates with better wages and occupational positions. This challenges the assumption of a trade-off between cultural maintenance and economic success. The presence of strong support networks—familial, religious, and associative—continues to play a significant role in facilitating upward mobility, echoing earlier observations on the social capital embedded in Portuguese-American communities (Ribeiro, 2000; Carvalho, 2010). These networks act as mediating structures that translate cultural cohesion into material advantage.

The results thus blur the boundaries between assimilation and integration. Portuguese descendants appear to follow neither a purely linear assimilation path nor the segmented trajectories identified for non-European groups. Instead, they illustrate a hybrid incorporation pattern shaped by three interrelated forces: community density, intergenerational transmission, and the symbolic revaluation of heritage. The retention of Portuguese language and cultural practices—especially through women’s roles in family transmission—suggests a conveyance of belonging by women that extends beyond economics, into the affective and symbolic domains. This dimension of belonging, though less tangible than income or education, plays a crucial role in sustaining a collective sense of success across generations.

Taken together, these findings point toward what may be termed selective belonging: a form of incorporation in which socioeconomic advancement and cultural continuity reinforce rather than contradict each other. Success, in this framework, is not defined by the abandonment of origin, but by the strategic negotiation of identity and opportunity within the host society. For Portuguese-Americans, belonging is both an inherited memory and a pragmatic resource—an evolving balance between adaptation and distinction. These findings advance discussions on European-descendant assimilation, revealing that integration outcomes are diverse and do not require the erasure of ethnic identity.

Beyond its empirical contribution, this research calls for a conceptual shift in how success is measured among descendants of immigrants. Quantitative indicators—education, income, employment—remain essential, yet they tell only part of the story. The Portuguese-American case reminds us that integration must also be assessed through the lenses of cultural transmission, symbolic capital, and the redefinition of heritage in multicultural settings. By moving beyond the assimilation paradigm, this study advances a more complex understanding of incorporation—one that acknowledges how success and belonging are co-constructed through social mobility, memory, and identity across generations.

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