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Comparing the discussion networks and voluntary association memberships of immigrants and non-immigrants in U.S. suburban gateways

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ABSTRACT

Using survey data from five Chicago (U.S.) suburbs, we build regression models comparing the social lives of immigrants and non-immigrants. We define immigration several ways (citizenship, legal status, immigrant generation, length of time in U.S., and race/ethnicity). Results indicate that the size, longevity and density of immigrants' discussion networks are mostly comparable to those of non-immigrants, as are the number and longevity of their voluntary association memberships. Immigrants and non-immigrants differ little in geographic location of their network confidants and organizational memberships. However, there is less racial/ethnic variety in immigrants' social lives, particularly if they are Latinx or not citizens.

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1. Introduction

After arriving in a host nation, immigrants face a new social world. Migration scholars have studied various aspects of how immigrants fare, including relations within immigrant communities (Avenarius, 2007; Cordero-Guzmán, 2005; Fennema, 2004; Sanders, 2002) and aspects of transnationalism such as transnational political mobilization (Tarrow, 2005), transnational parenting (Menjívar, 2012) and social and financial remittances (Levitt, 1998; Vertovec, 2004). Others study relations between immigrants and their host society, including incorporation into the host community (Liu and Painter, 2011; Marrow, 2009; Takle, 2015), how immigration affects the life chances of local populations (Waters et al., 2014) and natives' attitudes toward immigrants (Berg, 2009; Côté and Erickson, 2009; Fussell, 2014).

In this paper, we address the following research questions: Do immigrants and non-immigrants have different kinds of social lives? If so, how do they differ? Our approach has a combination of innovative traits. First, we compare how immigrants' social lives differ from non-immigrants in their host society. This complements existing research focusing solely on immigrants. Such studies provide detailed descriptions of immigrants' experiences without indicating whether they differ from those of non-immigrants. Sec-

ond, we conceptualize social lives as being reflected by the core discussion networks and voluntary associations in which people are involved. Although both receive research attention, discussion networks and memberships in voluntary associations are rarely studied together. Third, because we study specific suburban communities rather than a national sample, we have at least crude controls for local context. Our focal contribution, however, is to define immigration in several ways, breaking down the notion of a monolithic immigrant population and allowing for differences between sub-groups of immigrants and non-immigrants.

Specifically, we define immigration in terms of citizenship, legal status, length of time since arrival, immigrant generation, and racial/ethnic identity. We leverage a unique individual level dataset in order to build descriptive regression-based models of how immigrants differ from non-immigrants in terms of the following characteristics of their core social networks and voluntary association memberships: (1) volume, duration and density, (2) relative geographic location and spread, and (3) racial/ethnic composition. Our study is set in five suburbs of the Chicago (U.S.) Metropolitan Area.

2. Immigration in the U.S.

Between 1990 and 2010, the population of foreign-born people in the U.S. increased from 7.9% to 12.9% (Migration Policy Institute Data Hub 2013). These percentages lag behind the historic highs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when foreign-born residents constituted nearly fifteen percent of

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the U.S. population (Migration Policy Institute Data Hub 2013). The U.S. systematically closed its doors to various groups of migrants between the 1880s and 1920s by implementing a series of policies that were implicitly or explicitly based on race, religion and nation of origin (Iceland, 2009). This kept immigration low through most of the twentieth century. The 1965 Hart–Celler Act lifted nation of origin quotas, facilitating increased immigration (Iceland, 2009). President Reagan’s 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) boosted federal funding for immigration enforcement, but also offered amnesty to undocumented immigrants already in the country (Donato and Armenta, 2011). President Clinton’s 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), driven in part by the war on drugs, effectively criminalized many immigrants (Donato and Armenta, 2011; Waters and Jiménez, 2005). After 9/11, the Bush administration made immigration primarily a national security issue. The devolution of federal powers since 1980 and recent lack of federal reform created a decentralized patchwork of state and local policies. Some are hostile to immigrants (e.g., English-only policies and deputizing local police as immigration enforcement officers), but others are more welcoming (e.g., protections for day laborers and street vendors, and educational benefits for undocumented children). In 2006, tensions peaked in a series of pro- and anti-immigrant protests, including in Chicago (Pallares and Flores González, 2010). At the end of the second Obama administration, immigration reforms, like many immigrants, face an uncertain future.

Aside from policy, two recent trends in migration to the U.S. are important. One concerns settlement patterns. Between 1950 and 2000, the percent of the U.S. population living in suburban areas increased from 23.2% to 51.0% (Singer et al., 2008). Although suburbs traditionally housed the wealthy and middle classes, suburban poverty is no longer rare (Madden, 2003). Suburbs are more diverse in terms of race and socio-economic status than before, but they vary widely in racial and class diversity (Hall and Lee, 2009). Immigrants, too, are now more likely to live in suburbs. These are often referred to as “suburban gateways” (Singer et al., 2008), although in fact immigrants may migrate directly to the suburbs or move from an urban center to its periphery (Suro and Singer, 2002; Waters and Jiménez, 2005). Whereas suburban living once signaled immigrant assimilation, this is no longer the case, particularly for Latinx immigrants (Lichter et al., 2010). Suburban immigrants may lack access to ethnic businesses and immigrant-inclusive social service agencies (Li, 2008; Marrow, 2009), as well as facing transportation challenges (Kim, 2009). We address immigration in a suburban gateway setting.

The second important trend is that world events and U.S. policy changed the composition of the immigrant population over the last one hundred fifty years. Before the Civil War, most migrants to the U.S. came from northern Europe, whereas around the turn of the twentieth century most came from southern and eastern Europe. Most of these migrants were eventually constructed as being White (Roediger, 2005). By 2010, 53.1% of migrants to the U.S. came from Latin America, 28.2% from Asia, 12.1% from Europe, and 4.0% from Africa (Migration Policy Institute Data Hub 2013). Since at least 1980, Mexico has been the top sending nation to the U.S., followed by China, India and the Philippines (Migration Policy Institute Data Hub 2013). These newer streams of migrants are becoming incorporated into the U.S. racial/ethnic regime, some in the status of honorary Whites (Tuan, 1998) and others under more pernicious forms of racialization (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Tienda and Fuentes, 2014). Part of our analysis focuses on comparing Latinx immigrants with those who have other racial/ethnic identities. Note that although the U.S. Census separates questions about race from those on Hispanic origin, we use the blanket term “race/ethnicity” to acknowledge the racialization of Latinxs (Alcoff, 2000; Bonilla-Silva, 2004).

As a result of these and other factors, the immigrant population in the U.S. is far from monolithic. Certainly immigrants, their children, and grandchildren have different experiences. But an immigrant’s experience is also clearly shaped by when she arrived in the U.S., whether she became a citizen, or whether she is documented. We focus on these aspects of immigration as well as describing differences between immigrants from Latin America and other places. Specifically, we conceptualize immigrant status in five different ways. First, we consider citizenship, looking at the differences between native-born citizens, naturalized citizens and non-citizens. Next, we consider legal status by investigating the relative experiences of undocumented immigrants, documented immigrants who are not citizens, and citizens. Third, we evaluate the effects of time since entry to the U.S., looking for differences between recent immigrants, immigrants who have been in the U.S. for several decades, and native-born citizens. Fourth, we distinguish first and second generation immigrants from other residents. Fifth, we differentiate immigrants on the basis of race/ethnicity, separating immigrants who identify as Latinx from other immigrants (most of whom identify as either White or Asian) and from native-born citizens.

3. Immigration, discussion networks and voluntary associations

Core discussion networks and memberships in voluntary associations are both manifestations of a person’s social life. Social networks and memberships in voluntary organizations are linked to individual social capital (Lin, 2001), social support (Wellman and Wortley, 1990), social isolation (McPherson et al., 2006), and social protection (Faist et al., 2015). These phenomena garner attention because they have consequences for individuals, meaning that networks and memberships are deeply implicated in processes of inequality. Although we do not study the effects of social network connections and memberships in associations, we agree that they can have negative as well as positive outcomes, and reject the notion that the only hope for disadvantaged populations is self-help organized through networks and local associations (Domínguez and Watkins, 2003).

Discussion networks and voluntary association memberships are also consequential for immigrants, whether through social capital (Ebaugh and Curry, 2000; Faist, 2000; Granberry and Marcelli, 2007), social support (Luken and Tranmer, 2010; Schweizer et al., 1998) or even by shaping attitudes toward immigrants and immigration (Berg, 2009; Côté and Erickson, 2009; Oliver and Wong, 2003). In addition, migrant incorporation and integration are affected by immigrants’ social networks (Avenarius, 2012; Hagan, 1998) and experiences in voluntary associations (Han, 2004; Takle, 2015). Networks and associations also provide a matrix for making and reinforcing meaning, in the sense of building solidarity and confirming identity (Lubbers et al., 2007; Sanders, 2002). Finally, voluntary association memberships have instrumental functions for immigrants. Associations facilitate participation in the host civil society (Fennema and Tillie, 1999; Jacobs and Tillie, 2004) and can provide services to and advocate on behalf of members, as well as liaise between immigrants, their host nation and nation of origin (Cordero-Guzmán, 2005).

We study a number of factors, starting with discussion network size and number of memberships in specific types of associations. These provide basic assessments of differences in the volume of social connections made in networks and associations (Popielarz, 1999; Small, 2007; Wang and Wellman, 2010). We also study average tenure of network ties and memberships, for a rough glimpse of differences in the dynamics of both discussion networks (Bidart and Degenne, 2005; Martinovic et al., 2011; Small et al., 2015)

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