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How do they do it? The immigrant paradox in the transition to adulthood

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ABSTRACT

How do children of immigrants consistently outperform children of native-born U.S. parents, in spite of lower familial resources? Using the Transition to Adulthood Study of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, children of immigrant and native-born parents completing high school in 2005–13 are followed as they move into the young adult years. Children of immigrants are more likely to enroll in college, be employed or in school, and less likely to have a criminal record as young adults or to have a child than children of nonimmigrants. This is not a result of immigrant parentage but due primarily to greater parental educational expectations; immigrants enjoy a differential return to parental expectations for boys' college enrollment as well. Reading skills and activity patterns in the secondary school years also contribute to better outcomes. Children of immigrants are better able to translate their reading comprehension skills to college or employment later on.

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Immigrant children embody social mobility far more than any other group. Children of immigrants are more successful not only compared to their own parents but also compared to youth from similar racial/ethnic backgrounds whose parents were born in the U.S and whose families have more human capital, economic resources, and language facility (Garcia-Coll and Marks, 2012; Hernandez et al., 2012; Perreira et al., 2006; Portes and Zhou, 1993). In 2009 about 51% of 18–21 year olds who were high school graduates were enrolled in college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Adjusted to all youth 18–21, 80–90% of whom completed high school, we expect about 40% of all youth 18–21 to be enrolled in college. The Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) showed that, by age 24–25, 37% of male and 46% of female immigrants who came to the U.S as children or were children of immigrants were enrolled in or had completed a bachelor's degree (Feliciano and Rumbaut, 2005). College is not the only option, of course. Among youth 16–24 years of age, 77% of high school graduates and 65% of high school dropouts were employed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The CILS also showed that 80% of children of immigrants were employed either full or part-time at ages 24–25 (Rumbaut, 2005). Rates of incarceration of immigrant children were less than half those of natives, 1.25% compared with 3.5% (Rumbaut, 2005). The finding that, for most immigrant groups, children's accomplishments exceed not only those of their parents but nonimmigrant peers as well is known as the immigrant paradox (Pong and Landale, 2012).

Understanding the paradox of greater achievement among children of immigrants relative to the children of native-born parents entails understanding the strengths that immigrant families bring and the potential risks incurred in assimilation to

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the American way of life. Early studies focused primarily upon the association of immigrant generation, race/ethnicity, and family background with children's accomplishments (Glick and White, 2003) and recent studies have added parental expectations, academic achievement, and school engagement (Greenman, 2013; Hao and Woo, 2012; Perreira et al., 2006). We add activity patterns in the high school years as factors that contribute to children's life chances. Spending time on homework, playing video and computer games, and regular involvement in sports may integrate children into the school and community, distinguish immigrant from nonimmigrant children's pathways through school, and explain later success.

As have others, we examine both positive and potentially detrimental outcomes in young adulthood: high school completion, college enrollment, involvement in school or work, criminal activity, and childbearing. In contrast to previous research, this study has access to data on the full socioeconomic background and school experiences of children of immigrant and nonimmigrant parents from childhood through high school. Studies of the high school to young adulthood transition of immigrants, such as the CILS, have focused on cohorts coming of age in the 1990s (Feliciano and Rumbaut, 2005) but the performance of children of immigrants appears to be stronger in recent compared to earlier cohorts (White and Glick, 2009). The present study utilizes national data from a recent cohort of immigrant youth age 17 to 26 who completed high school during the period from 2005 to 2013. First collected when children were 10–17, subsequent interviews follow them through high school into young adulthood, comparing them to nonimmigrant youth. It identifies activity clusters through the adolescent years. It then quantifies the contribution of immigrant parentage to parental expectations, academic achievement, and activity choice and examines the fraction of young adult success attributable directly to immigrant parentage or indirectly through these mediators. Finally, it asks whether the influence of these mediators on the transition to adulthood differs for children of immigrants and natives.

1. Background and hypotheses

Based upon criteria that include finishing school, getting a job, avoiding trouble with the law, starting a family, and becoming self-sufficient, the transition of youth into adult roles and responsibilities between 18 and the mid 20s, “emerging adulthood,” has been lengthening (Arnett, 2004). In 1980 40% were married; today that fraction is cut in half. Reversing declines of the 1950s, the proportion of young men and women in their mid-20s living with their parents has increased; a quarter of white males age 25 lived at home in 2007 compared to one-fifth in 2000 and only about 13 percent in 1970 (Settersten and Ray, 2010). In the past, youth lived at home until they completed their schooling but post-secondary schooling is less and less likely for young men, who are falling behind their female counterparts. Access to good jobs for those without higher education has been restricted by reductions in the manufacturing sector (Settersten and Ray, 2010). Limited work opportunities for non-college youth limit self-sufficiency. As one indicator of this lag, in 2013 18% of young men 20–24 were neither enrolled in school nor working, compared with 11% in 2000; about the same proportion of women 20–24 (19%) were neither enrolled in school nor working in 2013 as in 2000 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2014).

Although transitions during this period of emerging adulthood have been studied for some time, they have been altered by a new set of circumstances: the increased fraction of young adults whose parents were immigrants. In 2008 almost 30% of the 68 million young adults 18–34 were foreign born or had a foreign born parent (Passel, 2011). In addition, 17 million children under age 18 who are immigrants or children of immigrants will be transitioning to adulthood in the next two decades. Their transitions to adulthood differ from those of youth whose parents were born in the United States for reasons that include wide disparities in parental human capital, family and neighborhood context, varied cultural traditions, different opportunities during the school years, and differential access to citizenship (Rumbaut, 1996; Rumbaut and Komaie, 2011). As one example, young men and women born in the U.S. to foreign-born parents are more likely to live at home than those born to native-born parents (Berlin et al., 2010). We anticipate increased heterogeneity in pathways to adulthood for recent cohorts of youth.

Besides socioeconomic disadvantage, of the 20 million young adults with immigrant parents in the U.S. in 2008, some 6 million young adults lacked legal status and, therefore, had limited access to both in-state tuition for higher education and to employment in many sectors of the economy (Passel, 2011; Rumbaut and Komaie, 2011). After June 15, 2012, immigrants under age 31 who arrived illegally as children (<16) and were currently enrolled in school, a high school graduate or GED recipient, had received an honorable discharge from the armed forces, and had no criminal record became eligible for deferred action (DACA) for up to two years and then eligible for work authorization (<http://www.uscis.gov/childhoodarrivals>). Thus recent cohorts of undocumented immigrant children have access to more opportunities than their predecessors (Greenman and Hall, 2013).

The primary focus of this research is to examine these markers of success for immigrant young adults in comparison to their native peers in this “new normal” period of emerging adulthood. It is important to understand what it is about immigrants' family background and school-year experience that leads to success in young adulthood relative to that of natives (Tseng, 2006; Feliciano and Rumbaut, 2005; Perreira et al., 2006). How do they do it?

1.1. What is linked to immigrant success?

Three explanations have been proposed for the successes of children of immigrants compared with children of natives: 1) the human, financial, and social capital parents bring with them, 2) the cultural capital of the family, and 3) the school and community context in which they are received (Alba and Nee, 2003; Perreira et al., 2006; Portes and Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Yoshikawa and Way, 2008). Human capital is represented by parental schooling, which is linked to economic and financial

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