



# Childhood and family experiences and the social integration of young migrants<sup>☆</sup>



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We show that age at migration affects social integration in adulthood.
- We compare siblings using Swedish register data on childhood migrants.
- Older at arrival means less likely to live close to, work with, and marry natives.
- Cultural identities more important mechanism than socioeconomic status.

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## ABSTRACT

We study how age at migration affects social integration in adulthood. Using Swedish register data, we estimate the effects of age at migration by comparing siblings arriving (as children) at the same time, but at different ages. Migrants who were older when they arrived are less likely to live close to, work with, and marry natives. We also study 2nd generation immigrants and show that parental time in the host country has similar (although somewhat weaker) effects for this group. The effects do not appear to be propagated through socioeconomic status. Instead, preferences or cultural identities appear as key mechanisms.

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## 1. Introduction

In most OECD-countries, substantial parts of the population are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants. It is also apparent that people of different descent are separated from each other in everyday life: neighbors, coworkers, and spouses of immigrants often tend to be immigrants as well (Zhou, 1997; Waldinger and Feliciano, 2004; Åslund and Skans, 2010). However, very little is known regarding the individual level determinants of this lack of integration, despite its prevalence in the public debate and its potential importance in shaping the structure of future societies.

The paper aims to further increase our understanding of the social integration process among youths with an immigration background

using very rich Swedish register data linking all individuals to their parents, siblings, neighbors, coworkers, and spouses. We focus on the role played by age at migration among migrants arriving before age 15, and on parental time in the host country for 2nd generation migrants. Empirically, we utilize sibling variation in age at migration and parental time in the host country as tools to isolate the effects of childhood environments on social integration among individuals with an otherwise comparable background. Our outcomes measure social integration at the residential market, the labor market, and the marriage market.

We rely on methods designed to handle the potential for reversed causality and omitted variables caused by the fact that the timing of migration and return migration patterns among parents may be affected by many different factors, including the age of the children in the family. By comparing siblings who arrive at different ages, or whose parents have stayed different number of years in the host country before giving birth, we are able to remove many different potential confounding factors such as endogenous time of migration, endogenous return migration, and potential errors in measured time of arrival and thereby isolate the effects of age at migration. The empirical application relies on a novel strategy for dealing with the time, age and cohort identity. This strategy serves as a viable fixed-effects alternative to earlier methods relying on cross-regional variations proposed by Bratsberg et al. (2006).

The previous literature on age-at-migration has almost exclusively focused on the impact on education and labor market outcomes, documenting a clear relationship.<sup>1</sup> These earlier findings are also corroborated within this paper. But our main focus is on the impact on integration, measured as the frequency of contacts with natives at different markets.

Previous research on integration processes indicates a number of plausible mechanisms through which age at migration may be causally related to the future social integration of immigrant youths. We can, for ease of exposition, broadly label these as skill-based or preference-based. As indicated above, age-at-migration appear to affect the *skills* as measured by performance in school or at the labor market. To the extent that economic performance changes the available opportunities on different markets, this may feed into differences in social integration as a reflection of the economic performance. Notably, proficiency in the host country language may also have a direct impact on the patterns of social interactions by making it easier to communicate with natives, and conversely for the mother tongue (see e.g. Bleakley and Chin, 2008, 2010).

It has also been suggested that childhood environment and experiences have a strong impact on *preferences* and cultural identity. Migrants often express strong ties to both their host country and their source country (Casey and Dustmann, 2010; Nekby and Rödin, 2010), and it is evident that experiences (as a child or by the parents) from the two countries may affect the relative strengths of these ties. According to ethnic identity development theories (Erikson, 1968), ethnic awareness should increase with age during childhood and adolescence.<sup>2</sup> Some studies suggest that the process starts very early, and that children have developed an ethnic identity already as three-year-olds (Weiland and Coughlin, 1979).<sup>3</sup>

In the paper we also study the impact of parents' exposure to the host country before childbirth for 2nd generation immigrants. We

address this issue since parents' country-specific skills are likely to be an important input in the production of children's skills. In addition, parents' attitudes appear to influence the labor market outcomes of their children (Thornton, et al, 1983; Fernandez et al, 2004), and parents may also be highly influential in choices of partners; most notably since marriages tend to serve the purpose of preserving a group's cultural characteristics (Kalmijn, 1998; Bisin and Verdier, 2000). The degree of intergenerational correlation in identity also appears to be high (Casey and Dustmann, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Previous studies have shown that women more than men tend to be considered as "carriers of culture" (e.g. Warikoo, 2005).

Our analysis is based on data from Sweden, a country which has experienced substantial immigration since the 1950s, resulting in 15% foreign-born residents in 2010. We study individuals born in 1960–1971 who either immigrated to Sweden before age 15 or whose parents arrived in Sweden 10 years or less before the subject was born. It should be noted that, although the time period covers some initial cohorts of refugees and family reunification migrants from fairly distant countries, it precedes the large waves of refugees in the late 1980s and 1990s for which economic integration has proven particularly problematic. The period we study is instead one of substantial labor migration, often from neighboring countries, and the adult migrants of the time are typically considered successful in terms of economic assimilation, at least when compared to later cohorts.

Despite these relatively favorable economic outcomes among the parents, we document strong segregating patterns among their children. Our analysis shows that childhood exposure to the host country matters in this respect; there is a strong impact of age at migration on integration in adulthood. Arriving five years later increases the fraction of immigrants at the workplace and in the neighborhood of residence by about 2 percentage points. The probability of having an immigrant spouse is increased by 12 percentage points. In contrast, we only find small and mostly insignificant effects of being the first-born child of the family — arriving a single year later has a substantially larger impact on integration than being the first-born child. Parental time in the host country before the subject's birth also has a significant and qualitatively similar impact, although smaller in magnitude. This suggests that the effects on integration partly work through own experiences and partly through parental experiences.

Further results show that the findings are unlikely to be explained by differences in educational and economic outcomes among the children or the parents. Instead, several observations point to the importance of early influences on ethnic identity and social ties to the country of origin. Although the effects are present for all immigrant groups (including those from neighboring Finland), they are much stronger for migrants from more distant countries. Late arrival to the host country primarily leads to more frequent exposure to other migrants from the same country (rather than to immigrants in general). This is particularly true at the marriage market, where preferences and social ties are likely to be particularly important. The strongest parental impact is found for female marriage patterns, which is consistent with a diminishing role of daughters as carriers of (origin country) culture as parents accumulate time in the host country. We do not see any evidence of distinct critical periods, as is often found in studies of age at migration and learning (e.g. Bleakley and Chin, 2010), suggesting that language skills are not the sole determinant of the results.

Further results also show that integration-age profiles are parallel across groups arriving at different ages, which indicates that the effects on integration are permanent or highly persistent. Overall, the results thus imply that early life experiences are formative. They have a profound impact on the patterns of future social interactions, which cannot be explained by educational or economic outcomes, but which are

<sup>1</sup> See for example Schaaftma and Sweetman (2001), Gonzalez (2003) Cortes (2006) and van Ours and Veenman (2006). Given that early qualifications have been shown to transmit into future performance (Cunha and Heckman 2007), it is not surprising that school performance and educational attainment are related to the age at arrival. However, some evidence indicates that the long-term educational impact may be smaller than the short-term effects (Böhlmark, 2008, 2009). See Kao and Tienda (1995), Riphahn (2001), and Chiswick and DebBurman (2004) for additional results.

<sup>2</sup> See Marks et al. (2007) for a review of the empirical support.

<sup>3</sup> The evidence on the empirical association between identity and economic outcomes is mixed, see Clark and Drinkwater (2007), Nekby and Rödin (2010), Casey and Dustmann (2010), and Battu and Zenou (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Theoretical work studying the mechanisms behind cultural transmission across generations include Bisin and Verdier (2001), and Saez-Marti and Sjögren (2008).

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