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Children of Immigration

THE DEVELOPING CHILD SERIES

CHILDREN OF IMMIGRATION

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THE DEVELOPING CHILD

Bringing together and illuminating the remarkable recent research on development from infancy to adolescence, for students of developmental psychology, policy makers, parents, and all others concerned with the future of the next generation.

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While we are the sole "parents" of this book, many members of our "extended family" have been involved in its delivery and upbringing. It is a treat for us to thank all of the individuals and institutions that have so generously supported us during this project.

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CHILDREN OF IMMIGRATION

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Large-scale immigration is one of the most important social developments of our time. It is a transformational process affecting families and their children. Once immigrants are settled, they send for their loved ones or form new families. Hence, the story of today's immigrants is also a saga of their children: a fascinating and critical—but too often forgotten—chapter of the immigrant experience. The children of immigrants, who make up 20 percent of all youth in the United States, are an integral part of the American fabric. This book explores their experiences.

First, a word about our use of the terms "immigrant children" and "children of immigrants." When we refer to immigrant children, we strictly mean foreign-born children who have migrated, not the U.S.-born second generation. "Children of immigrants," on the other hand, refers to both U.S.-born and foreign-born children. While the experiences of U.S.-born and foreign-born children differ in many respects (most importantly, all U.S.-born children are U.S. citizens), they nevertheless share an important common denominator: immigrant parents.

The children of immigrants follow many different pathways; they forge complex and multiply determined identities that resist easy generalizations. Some do extremely well in their new country. Indeed, research suggests that immigrant children are healthier, work harder in school, and have more positive social attitudes than their nonimmigrant peers.[1] Every year, the children of immigrants are

overrepresented in the rosters of high school valedictorians and receive more of their share of prestigious science awards. They are regularly admitted to our most competitive elite universities. Immigrant children in general arrive with high aspirations and extremely positive attitudes toward education.

While we name and celebrate the hard-earned successes of many children of immigrants, there are reasons to worry about the long-term adaptations of others. Why should we worry? Because many children of immigrants today are enrolling in violent and overcrowded inner-city schools where they face overwhelmed teachers, hypersegregation by race and class, limited and outdated resources, and otherwise decaying infrastructures.[2] Disconcertingly high numbers of these children are leaving schools with few skills that would ensure success in today's unforgiving global economy. At a time when the U.S. economy is generating no meaningful jobs for high-school dropouts, many children of immigrants are dropping out of school. In brief, while many immigrant children succeed, others struggle to survive.

Anxiety has surged in recent years over the continued large-scale immigration into the United States. As in eras past, immigrants have been received with ambivalence. Though immigrant children arrive with remarkably positive social attitudes—toward schooling, authority figures, and the future—we argue in this book that their developing psyches are susceptible to the negative "social mirroring" that many experience in the new land. We contend that the immigrants' initial positive attitudes are a remarkable resource that must be cultivated. As a society we would be best served by harnessing those energies.

With more than 130 million migrants worldwide and a total foreign-born population of nearly 30 million people in the United States alone, immigration is rapidly transforming the postindustrial scene. In New York City schools, 48 percent of all students come from immigrant-headed households speaking more than one hundred different languages. In California, nearly 1.5 million children are classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). This is not only

an urban or southwestern phenomenon—schools across the country are encountering growing numbers of children from immigrant families. Even in places like Dodge City, Kansas, more than 30 percent of the children enrolled in public schools are the children of immigrants. To quote Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz,* we are not in Kansas any more.

Discussions around immigration have typically concentrated on policy issues and, especially, the economy. With the exception of bilingual education, the debate about immigration—as well as much of the basic research—has focused predominantly on immigrant adults. Yet nationwide, "first and second generation immigrant children are the most rapidly growing segment of the U.S. child population."[3] The future character of American society and economy will be intimately related to the adaptations of the children of today's immigrants, even in the unlikely case of a drastic reduction of immigration in the coming decades.

A central theme of *Children of Immigration* is how the children of immigrants are faring in American society. What do we know about the children of immigrants? How does immigration affect the family system? How are the children adapting to our schools and making the transition to the workplace? We focus attention on their schooling because schools are where immigrant children first come into systematic contact with the new culture. Furthermore, adaptation to school is a significant predictor of a child's future well-being and contributions to society.

For the children of immigrants today, it is the best of times and the worst of times. In this book we explore the question of how it happens that while most immigrants enter the country with optimism and an energetic work ethic, many of their children are at risk of being marginalized and "locked out" of opportunities for a better tomorrow. Why will many immigrant children graduate from Ivy League colleges while others will end up in federal penitentiaries? For too many of the children of our most recent immigrants, the "Golden Door" of Emma Lazarus's classic poem is turning out to be more gilded than gold.

Exploring New Patterns of Immigration

Models developed over the past few decades to explain the immigrant experience in American society have been based largely on the European experience. Patterns of assimilation depicted a generally upwardly mobile journey; they foretold that the longer immigrants stayed in the United States, the better they would do in terms of schooling, health, and income. As Berkeley sociologist Robert Bellah once noted, "The United States was planned for progress," and each wave of immigrants was said to recapitulate this national destiny.

More recently, however, a number of distinguished social scientists have argued that a "segmentation" in the American economy and society is generating new patterns of immigrant insertion into American culture.[4] Factors such as race and color, parental education and socioeconomic status, racism, and interactions with other ethnic minority groups work together to shape the new immigrant's journey to and experience in the United States.[5] Today some new immigrants are progressing up the socioeconomic ladder at a rate never before seen in the history of U.S. immigration. Other newcomers may be getting locked out of the opportunity structure—in effect creating what some have termed a "rainbow underclass."[6] The children of these immigrants, not surprisingly, are at risk of achieving less than their native-born peers in terms of grades, performance in standardized tests, and attitudes toward education. They are also at risk of having a higher dropout rate.[7]

Furthermore, several scholars from different disciplines and using a variety of methods have identified another disconcerting phenomenon. For many immigrant groups, length of residency in the United States is associated with declining health, school achievement, and aspirations.[8] A recent large-scale National Research Council (NRC) study considered a variety of measures of physical health and risk behaviors among children and adolescents from immigrant families—including general health, learning disabilities, obesity, emotional difficulties, and risk behaviors. These NRC researchers found that immigrant youth were healthier than their counterparts from nonimmigrant families. These findings are

"counterintuitive in light of the minority status, overall lower socioeconomic status, and higher poverty rates that characterize many immigrant children and families." The NRC study also found that the longer that immigrant youth remain in the United States, the poorer their overall physical and psychological health. Furthermore, the more "Americanized" they became, the more likely they were to engage in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, unprotected sex, and delinquency.[9]

In the area of education, sociologists Rubén Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes surveyed more than 5,000 high school students in San Diego, California, and Dade County, Florida.[10] They conclude that "an important finding supporting our earlier reported research is the *negative* association of length of residence in the United States with both GPA and aspirations. Time in the United States is, as expected, strongly predictive of improved English reading skills; but despite that seeming advantage, longer residence in the U.S. and second generation status [that is, being born in the United States] are connected to declining academic achievement and aspirations, net of other factors."[11] In a different voice, Reverend Virgil Elizondo, rector of the San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, articulates this same problem: "I can tell by looking in their eyes how long they've been here. They come sparkling with hope, and the first generation finds hope rewarded. Their children's eyes no longer sparkle."[12]

A number of social scientists have explored the issues of variability and decline in the academic performance and social adaptation of immigrant children. Several factors have been implicated. Social scientists have argued that the "capital" that the immigrant families bring with them—including financial resources, social class and educational background, psychological and physical health, as well as social supports—have a clear influence on the immigrant experience. Legal status, race, color, and language also mediate how children adapt to the upheavals of immigration. Economic opportunities and neighborhood characteristics—including the quality of schools where immigrants settle, racial and class segregation, neighborhood decay, and violence—all contribute significantly to the

adaptation process. Anti-immigrant sentiment and racism also play a role. These factors combine in ways that lead to very different outcomes.

In this book we take a new, interdisciplinary perspective: we consider historical as well as contemporary social attitudes, opportunities, and barriers. We also examine in some detail the psychosocial experiences of immigration and consider how these factors may interact in ways that lead to divergent pathways of adaptation and identity formation.

Immigration typically results in substantial gains for the people who move. Some immigrants escape political, religious, or ethnic persecution, while others migrate for economic reasons. Long-separated families may be reunited. Some immigrants are motivated by the opportunity for social mobility, while others migrate in the spirit of adventure. Though immigration is a highly stressful process, for many, immigration is worth the sacrifices. But the gains of immigration come at a considerable cost.

Immigrant families profoundly feel the pressures of migration. Immigration can destabilize family life in a variety of ways. New data from the Harvard Immigration Project suggest that the immigrant journey into the United States is a highly fractured, phase-specific process that results in psychosocially complex patterns of family fragmentation and reunification. Children are often left behind in the country of origin in the care of grandparents or other relatives. In other cases, the children are sent ahead to the United States to stay with distant relatives while the rest of the family prepares for their own migration. Often it is years before the nuclear family is reunited. In this book, we examine the psychosocial processes involved in these patterns of entry into American society.

We also explore the Faustian bargain that every immigrant parent makes: although many immigrant parents are motivated by a desire for a better future for their children, the very process of immigration tends to undermine parental authority and family cohesion. A common fear for immigrant parents is to "lose" their children to the new culture. We consider the seductive draw of the more acculturated peer group that often works to undermine the parental voice. In

these pages, we recognize how vitally important to the children's successful adaptation are the parents' ability to maintain respect for family and the child's connection to the culture of origin. Our data suggest that those children whose parents maintain a voice of authority while encouraging them to achieve what we term "bicultural competencies" will be best placed to take full advantages of the opportunities available.

Immigrant children undergo a particular constellation of changes and experiences likely to influence their developing psyches. We examine how the ambivalent reception that many encounter exacerbates the stresses of immigration. We also develop a theoretical framework around the concept of "social mirroring" to explore how the children of immigrants come to craft their identities in part as a function of how they are viewed and received by the dominant culture. Immigration can become traumatic for children when anti-immigrant disparagement and discrimination, as well as structural barriers, add to the already stressful nature of immigration. How does a child incorporate the notion that she is an alien, or an illegal—that she is unwanted and does not warrant the most basic rights of education and health care?

In the United States, the history of anti-immigrant sentiment is as long as the history of immigration itself. Today, this sentiment appears to endure as a "last frontier" in which citizens openly vent racial and ethnic hostilities. While blatant racism is largely confined to the fringes of society, anti-immigrant sentiments are more freely indulged in public opinion, policy debates, and other social forums. Even children articulate anti-immigrant feelings. Students in a public high school in Northern California had these thoughts to share with educational researcher Laurie Olsen: "They come to take our jobs, and are willing to break their backs . . . and we can't compete." Another said, "These Chinese kids come over here and all they do is work and work and work and work, and all you have to do is look in the AP classes and you'll see they are filling them up. No one can compete any more." Still another summed up a prevailing fear: "They just want to take over."[13]

Whether seen as high-achieving book-obsessed competitors or as