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Exceptional Outcomes: Achievement in Education and Employment among Children of Immigrants

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No Margin for Error: Educational and Occupational Achievement among Disadvantaged Children of Immigrants

Alejandro Portes and Patricia Fernández-Kelly,
Princeton University

Background

The majority of second-generation children of immigrants are progressing educationally and occupationally, but a significant minority is left behind.

- This minority is not distributed randomly across nationalities, but corresponds closely to predictions based on immigrant parents' human capital, family type, and modes of incorporation.
- It makes a big difference whether they assimilate by joining the middle class or the marginalized, and largely racialized, population at the bottom of the society.
- Three major factors have been identified: the human capital that immigrant parents bring with them, the social context that receives them in America, and the composition of the immigrant family.
- A recurring theme in interviews was the presence of stern parental figures who controlled, if not suppressed, extensive external contacts and who sought to preserve cultural and linguistic traditions.
- In addition to authoritative, alert parents is the appearance of a *really* significant other who takes a keen interest in the child.

Hypotheses

Given the smallness of the sample and the retroactive character of the interviews, the causal factors identified by the study can be read as hypotheses in need of further validation.

- Several of the factors identified are internal to immigrant families and, hence, not readily amenable to external intervention:
 - the presence of authoritative parents capable of controlling children and protecting them from outside perils;
 - the existence of family retrospectives and middle-class cultural capital brought from the home country;
 - the motivational messages that parents transmit to children; and
 - the number, order, and gender of siblings.
- On the other hand, some factors can be strengthened by policy:
 - organized voluntary programs to assist and inform minority students in inner-city schools;
 - support for teachers and counselors who take a direct interest in these children and drive them in their studies; and
 - the availability of community colleges that provide skills for decent employment and serve as stepping stones to four-year institutions, including incentive schedules for school personnel and financial support for effective outside programs.

NOTE: Even with the best-intentioned policies and the most effective interventions in place, immigrant children who grow up in conditions of severe disadvantage will have great difficulty making it to college.

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Success Attained, Deterred, and Denied: Divergent Pathways to Social Mobility in Los Angeles's New Second Generation

Min Zhou, University of California, Los Angeles; Jennifer Lee,
University of California, Irvine; Jody Agius Vallejo,
University of Southern California; Rosaura Tafoya-Estrada,
University of California, Irvine; and Yang Sao Xiong,
University of California, Los Angeles

Background

The results of this study dispel some of the myths about group-based cultures, stereotypes, and processes of assimilation and also further the theoretical debates about intergenerational mobility and immigrant incorporation.

- The majority of America's newcomers and their children are achieving rates of social and economic mobility that are comparable to the earlier waves of European immigrants.

NOTE: Significant intergenerational progress should not overshadow, however, the signs of downward mobility, including high school dropout rates, unemployment or underemployment, poverty, premature childbearing, and incarceration, disproportionately represented in some national-origin groups.

Mobility Assessment

In addition to current measures, mobility assessment must also measure the extent to which immigrant groups demonstrate intergenerational progress.

- The authors' subject-centered approach includes the way these subjects' lived experiences are placed at the center of their analysis.

NOTE: The authors find that the second generation defines success by degrees of dignity, respect, independence, and economic self-sufficiency rather than by traditional middle-class American values and norms.

Roadblocks

Many children of unauthorized immigrants find themselves hitting one road block after another as they attempt to move ahead in the United States.

- In school, they are often tracked into low-level or remedial classes because of their poor English-language skills.
- Those who graduate from high school soon give up their dream of attending college because they do not have access to financial aid.
- Often, due to how they entered the United States, they are unable to supply the official forms of identification, such as a passport, social security card, or driver's license.

Mobility Factors

The analysis of life histories in the study reveals some significant mechanisms that serve to neutralize advantages or circumvent disadvantages.

- Legal status is essential for social mobility among immigrant children.
- Middle-class cultural capital brought from the home country can offset initial parental downward mobility.
- Family educational expectations can have varied effects on outcomes.
- Cultural memory from the home country plays a critical role.
- Access to public resources is paramount.

Conclusion

The authors' argument underscores four critical points.

- First, we need to problematize conventional notions of "assimilation" and "success."
- Second, we should revisit the commonly held assumptions underlying conventional models of intergenerational mobility.
- Third, we should critically examine how unconventional pathways may lead to positive mobility outcomes.
- Finally, we need a better understanding of the reasons that underlie the educational and occupational choices made by members of the 1.5 and second generation.

The Role of School in the Upward Mobility of Disadvantaged Immigrants' Children

Lingxin Hao, Johns Hopkins University; and Suet-ling Pong, The Pennsylvania State University

Background

According to segmented assimilation theory, lower-class position and minority status make immigrants' children vulnerable to downward assimilation through the influence of inner-city school peers who react to discrimination

by rejecting education and other paths to upward mobility. However, little is known about the role of the school as an institution that may prepare immigrant children to ascent the social ladder.

- Previous research on immigrant children focuses on school outcomes. Less is known about their social positions when they reach young adulthood.

- School Effects* Secondary schools have long-term effects on social positions.
- School structural attributes include a narrow curriculum and a strong academic focus.
 - School relational attributes include educator-student bonds.
- Social Positions* Three dimensions of social positions of immigrant children in their late twenties are considered: educational attainment, fields of specialty, and labor force attachment.
- Conclusions* Three major findings can be drawn from the authors' analysis.
- The majority of disadvantaged students attend public schools.
 - Children's upward mobility is affected by the structural and relational attributes of their high schools.
 - The authors find substantial differences in the mobility patterns among Chinese, Mexicans, and Whites.
 - Chinese fare better but Mexicans fare worse than native-born whites with respect to young-adult social positions.
 - The large gap between Mexicans and whites is particularly worrisome, because Mexicans make up the largest group of children who have immigrant parents.

NOTE: Investing in improving the structural and relational attributes of public schools is part of the solution for disadvantaged children. For all racial/ethnic groups, upward social mobility of first- and second-generation students appears to be much more dependent on their experiences in secondary school than that of their higher-generation counterparts.

Disparities in the Educational Success of Immigrants: An Assessment of the Immigrant Effect for Asians and Latinos

Angel L. Harris, Kenneth M. Jamison,
and Monica H. Trujillo, Princeton University

- Summary* This study compares how immigrants from the largest immigrant groups (Asians and Latinos) compare to whites on a range of educational outcomes.
- It looks at the extent to which socioeconomic background and immigrant characteristics explain differences in academic outcomes.
 - The empirical findings show Asian immigrants have better educational outcomes than whites, which is accounted for by immigrant characteristics.

*Achievement
Predictors*

- Mexican and Puerto Rican immigrants have lower educational outcomes than whites, mostly explained by socioeconomic background.
- Furthermore, the findings illustrate the importance of employing the proper reference group for immigration scholars.

Below are predictors of academic achievement and educational attainment for immigrant children.

- *Parental socioeconomic status:* Parental educational and socioeconomic attainment influences their children's educational attainment.
- *Immigrant advantage:* Cultural resources for immigrant families strongly impact the educational and occupational achievement of immigrant children.
- *Expected results:* Socioeconomic status (SES) and immigrant characteristics will vary in their ability to explain group differences in educational attainment.

Key Findings

This study yields several key findings.

- The academic advantages held by Asian immigrants relative to whites are partially explained by socioeconomic status and fully explained by their immigrant and socioeconomic characteristics combined.
- The academic disadvantage observed among Mexican and Puerto Rican immigrants relative to whites is largely explained by their lower socioeconomic status.
- There exist notable differences between Asian or Cuban immigrants and their native counterparts but not between Mexican or Puerto Rican immigrants and their native coethnics.

*Suggestions for
Future Research*

- For socioeconomically disadvantaged families, informational and community resources are perhaps necessary for parental immigrant drive to have its effect on their children's scholastic achievement.
- Ethnic differences in the degree to which immigrant students are rewarded in grades for displaying respect and proper behavior in the classroom may also help explain group variation in educational attainment.

The Back Pocket Map: Social Class and Cultural Capital as Transferable Assets in the Advancement of Second-Generation Immigrants

Patricia Fernández-Kelly, Princeton University

Background

Low-income immigrant children who have surpassed expectations exhibit two major features related to family and school dynamics.

- Authoritarian parenting, in the first instance, protects youth from the hazards of external influence, especially from peers.
- Schooled-based programs and individuals supplement parental gaps in information and experience by assisting youngsters as they negotiate the difficult paths leading to college.

- Directions for Research* The self-selected character of international migration points in two research directions.
- One demands a better understanding of the class background of immigrants who may experience poverty but whose social standing in countries of origin may entail resources not properly acknowledged.
 - The second focuses on which factors associated with class position in countries of origin intervene in places of immigrant destination to facilitate or impede successful incorporation into the receiving society.
- Influencers on Children* Skillful teachers, counselors, and mentors play a decisive role in the life of striving immigrant children.
- It is they, not immigrant parents, who can act as bridging agents, telling students about the importance of SAT scores, the significance of timely applications, and the paramount role played by well-crafted personal statements and letters of recommendation.
- Positive Emulation* Positive emulation entails the capacity to adopt, through unconscious imitation, gestures and actions that translate into effective manipulation or control of a surrounding environment.
- Historical Accounts* Familial and historical accounts enable immigrant children to develop a dignified identity and place material deprivation in a wider context.
- Conclusion* The factors in this study that enable impoverished immigrant children to succeed do not conform to images spawned by the conservative/liberal divide.
- It is not values that differentiate these families from others with larger means or higher standards, but rather the capacity to control children, often through brute force, and to keep them away from the influence of peer groups in public spaces.

Ethnic Communities and School Performance among the New Second Generation in the United States: Testing the Theory of Segmented Assimilation

Clemens Kroneberg, University of Mannheim

- Background* This article critically reviews the theory of segmented assimilation (TSA), which has become a popular framework for explaining the adaptation of the children of the post-1969 wave of immigration to the United States.
- The author challenges the notions that ethnic communities are generally supportive of the school performance of the second generation, while contact with the oppositional cultures of domestic minorities is the main cause of lower-than-average achievement.
 - Accordingly, the extent to which immigrant families' insertion into ethnic communities can support the school performance depends on the communities' socioeconomic profile and level of aspirations.

- The TSA has portrayed ethnic communities as an important source of social capital for immigrants' children.

Results

The author provides a list of results from his analyses:

- The nationality background and the school attended play an important role in the school performance of immigrants' children.
- The variation between nationality groups is due to differences in a set of basic individual and family background variables, as well as to school attributes.
- Average education and percentage of self-employed are positively correlated but clearly measure different dimensions of the communities' socioeconomic profiles.
- Students whose parents assimilate socially do better than those whose parents have a coethnic orientation.
- The general commitment to education in ethnic communities has a strong influence on school performance that partly mediates, but is not fully reducible to, the impact of their socioeconomic profile.

Conclusion

In regard to the TSA,

- this analysis does not support the interpretation that the resilient interethnic differences in school performance reflect differences in the way groups were received by the U.S. government and society.
- the same is true with respect to the hypothesis that immigrants' children and their families can derive social capital from ethnic communities to the extent that these are characterized by dense social networks and high levels of bounded solidarity.

Implications

The findings carry several important implications for the current debate about assimilation in the field.

- They support a central claim of the segmented assimilation perspective that has been questioned by its critics.
- Processes in ethnic communities do seem to be responsible for the resilient interethnic differences in school performance among the new second generation.
- Contrary to the traditional assimilationist perspective, the results also show that close attachment to one's ethnic community might *under certain circumstances* be associated with more positive adaptation.

Fit to Miss, but Matched to Hatch: Success Factors among the Second Generation's Disadvantaged in South Florida

Lisa Konczal, Barry University; and William Haller, Clemson University

Background

The purpose of this article is to augment and extend the analysis of the factors contributing to successful mobility outcomes from extreme disadvantage among the most underprivileged members of the immigrant second generation.

Rational Choice One subcurrent of thought is that knowledge of barriers to successful outcomes can undermine the odds of achieving those outcomes.

- A constant for success is the appearance of a *really* significant other—a teacher, a counselor, a friend of the family, or even an older sibling.

Conclusion This work views agency as a struggle to overcome the barriers created by social structure and, ultimately, how to find one's way within it.

- On a macro level, they are individuals like those in southern Florida, home to one of the most successful immigrant groups in the United States (the pre-Mariel Cubans).
- This study's respondents, however, lived in the poorest areas of Miami, rife with conflict. Schools in these areas are better defined as mobility traps than as vehicles for achievement.
- An inertial force keeps immigrants—no matter how disadvantaged—in the “safety zone” of their own community.
 - It takes courage to implement the rational choice of leaving areas that offer relative safety but at the cost of permanent stagnation and poverty.
- The inertial power of everyday life and the threat of social disapproval is more likely to be overcome when really significant others intervene or when traumatic events provoke a strong emotional rejection of one's surroundings.
 - Paradoxically, emotions can lead to rationality, allowing at least some second-generation youth to break away from near-certain downward assimilation.

Educational Hopes, Documented Dreams: Guatemalan and Salvadoran Immigrants' Legality and Educational Prospects

Cecilia Menjivar, Arizona State University

Background This article examines how legal status shapes views and prospects of Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants' lives that are fundamental in shaping their educational fortunes.

- An ambiguous legal status molds views and perceptions of educational prospects and, as such, is central in determining how immigrants perceive their educational prospects.
- Their legality, while not the *only* determining factor, does exacerbate and facilitate other conditioning circumstances, such as financial difficulties, family separations, and so on.
- This article looks at the importance of immigration policies in shaping assimilation in critical ways.

NOTE: These Central Americans come to the United States disadvantaged in terms of educational levels, and they also have faced one of the worst contexts of reception—hostile immigration laws exacerbated by anti-immigrant sentiment and a resource-poor coethnic community. These immigrants also have experienced significant family separation, reconstitution, and dissolution.

Salvadorans and Guatemalans

The case of Salvadorans and Guatemalans presents an optimal opportunity to capture the effects of legal marginality on the lives of immigrants.

- These Central Americans have been categorized in the United States neither strictly as economic migrants nor as political refugees.
- This aspect of life among these immigrants has been referred to as “permanent temporariness” or “liminal legality.”

The Effect of Legal Status

The immigrants in this study pointed to other circumstances in their lives that exacerbate the effect that legal status has and that interfere with their educational aspirations, such as financial constraints, family separations, and demands from relatives back home.

- These immigrants believe in the meritocratic notion that education is a key to success, but the reality is that they cannot reap these perceived benefits from their marginality legal positions.
- Thus, even when immigrants perform tasks through which they participate in and contribute to society, they are excluded from full membership if they lack full (permanent) legal recognition.
- This examination demonstrates that states’ immigration policies matter a great deal for mobility across generations.
- The cases of the Central Americans highlight the important link between legal status and educational aspirations. Significantly, it is helpful to remember that in an era of increasingly restrictive immigration and immigrant policies, the Central Americans are very likely not the only immigrants living midway between legal spaces.

The Coming of the Second Generation: Immigration and Ethnic Mobility in Southern California

Rubén G. Rumbaut, University of California, Irvine

Background

The focus of this article is on the educational mobility of foreign-parentage young adults of Mexican, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Filipino, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian origin, compared to native-parentage white, black, and Mexican American peers.

- The author examines factors affecting mobility, including modes of incorporation, parental human capital and legal/citizenship status, family and neighborhood contexts, early school achievement, acculturation, incarceration, and teenage and nonmarital childbearing.
- The author considers the relationship between acculturation and mobility outcomes and examines resulting patterns of urban ethnic inequality.

Mobility

Intergenerational mobility indices are calculated to show the educational attainment of sons and daughters compared to their fathers and mothers, at two poles of attainment: college graduates and high school dropouts. The prospects for socioeconomic mobility among children of immigrants hinge on their access to public colleges and universities.

- In California the system of public higher education is based on a three-tier plan adopted in 1960, which sought to balance the demands of excellence for the few with educational access for the many.
- On one hand, California's public universities are factories of social mobility; on the other, they reproduce and widen social inequalities.

Findings

Compared to their parents, all adult children show educational progress but at very different rates.

- Chinese and Korean students display exceptional achievement, as do Vietnamese women.
- By comparison, the achievements of Filipinos are moderate, but they surpass those of native whites.
- Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Cambodians, and Laotians include slightly more college graduates than high school dropouts; their educational achievements parallel those of native blacks.
- Among Mexicans, by far the largest immigrant group, the 1.5 generation is twice as likely to drop out of high school than to graduate from college; the second generation reverses the pattern, but educational achievement appears to peak in the second generation and to become stymied thereafter.

Context

Context of reception matters.

- An undocumented status blocks access to opportunity.
- Without means to adjust their status, undocumented young adults are ineligible for most forms of financial aid in colleges and universities.
- A growing pool of acculturated but excluded workers is therefore forced underground.
- The predictable result is the widening and perpetuation of ethnic inequalities.

“Here’s Your Diploma, Mom!” Family Obligation and Multiple Pathways to Success

Tekla Nicholas, Alex Stepick, and Carol Dutton Stepick,
Florida International University

Background

This article focuses on the different pathways that Haitian students follow to eventual success despite the tremendous challenges they faced.

- *Constant motivated achievers* maintain a strong focus on academic goals and make sacrifices to achieve those goals.
- *Persistent strivers* have not achieved as readily or as highly as the previous category and, despite their effort, tend to do poorly in academic tests.
- *Late bloomers* eventually come to recognize the value of education after not doing well in high school.

NOTE: Constant motivated achievers and persistent strivers work hard throughout their school careers to fulfill the dreams of parents. The desire to fulfill an obligation to one's parents through education is based on Haitian cultural conceptions and social practices related to family.

Obstacles

For most Haitians, aspirations do not predict academic accomplishment. Very few Haitian immigrants succeed academically.

- At least part of Haitians' relative lack of success can be attributed to the poor schools they attend in segregated neighborhoods.
- Haitians also confront one of the most negative contexts of reception of any contemporary immigrant group.
- Haitians confront further prejudice and discrimination from the general population that commonly identifies them as responsible for HIV and AIDS contagion.
- Haitians are routinely portrayed as poor, without skills, and undeserving of residence in the United States.

Family Factor

In general, Haitian children confront all the conditions that are thought to lead to downward assimilation and low educational outcomes, yet the students described in this article overcame extreme obstacles.

- Constant motivated achievers, persistent strivers, and, eventually, late bloomers show a motivation to succeed academically for their family rather than for themselves.
- A key is how they respond to strict parenting.
 - Constant motivated achievers and persistent strivers all asserted that they had to reach academic goals on behalf of their parents, or to honor a particular parent who had struggled and had been unable to achieve his or her own goals.
- The desire to pay back and please one's parents and help one's children is embedded in familial social relations that emphasize interdependence, not autonomy.

Becoming American, Becoming Minority, Getting Ahead: The Role of Racial and Ethnic Status in the Upward Mobility of the Children of Immigrants

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the City University of New York

Background

This article argues that within both ethnic communities and mainstream institutions, programs originally intended to address the needs of previous immigrant waves and native minority groups, particularly African Americans, have become increasingly multicultural in focus.

- For at least some of the children of immigrants, the institutions and strategies developed by previous waves of immigrants have become a source of opportunities as well as constraints.
- More important is the question of how American society is different from in the past. This is particularly true when we examine the role of racial and ethnic identity in shaping the incorporation of immigrants.

Education Issues Today, many young people from immigrant backgrounds report feeling out of place in elite educational institutions.

- It is important not to minimize the anti-immigrant sentiment that today's second generation sometimes faces, on campus and elsewhere. Institutions and programs originally conceived as helping earlier immigrants and native minorities play an important role in addressing these issues.

New Jews? Since 1970, approximately three hundred thousand Russian Jews have settled in New York.

- The children of this group in the New York Second Generation study have been notably successful, and college education is nearly universal. They have been greatly aided by support from the long-standing Jewish community.

New Blacks? Nonwhite immigrants and their children are often better positioned to benefit from the shift in ideas about race and ethnicity than many members of long-standing U.S. minorities—particularly African Americans.

New Others? African Americans remain the nation's most consistently oppressed minority group. Immigrants and their children may seek to avoid being categorized as "black" or even "like blacks" for many reasons. However, they also make use of services designed for the African American community and sometimes provided by that community.

Conclusion This article is about young people who have beaten the odds and have achieved success. The United States is a better place for it.

- They have drawn on ideas and institutions that were created in earlier struggles for inclusion in the United States, which only reminds us that American society is never static.
- There are some notes of caution:
 - Few people in any ethnic group will ever attend one of the nation's leading universities.
 - Increasingly, young people who have spent most of their lives in this country find themselves locked out of meaningful opportunities due to their parents' status as illegal immigrants.
 - We must acknowledge that attempts to encourage diversity in higher education have proved insufficient to address the depths of poverty and exclusion among native minority youth.

NOTE: There is danger that the relative success of the children of immigrants obscures the problems faced by segments of the native minority population.

Horatio Alger Lives in Brooklyn: Extrafamily Support, Intrafamily Dynamics, and Socially Neutral Operating Identities in Exceptional Mobility among Children of Mexican Immigrants

Robert C. Smith, Baruch College and Graduate Center,
City University of New York

Background

Using a Mexican student, Emmanuel, as a model, this article interrogates current theories on the incorporation of immigrant youths, including segmented assimilation. Given the myriad and stark disadvantages Emmanuel faced, the key task of this article is to explain his "disproportionate" success.

Theoretical Framing

This article engages three main theories explaining second-generation incorporation, including Portes and Rumbaut's segmented assimilation theory, Alba and Nee's remade assimilation theory, and Kasinitz and his colleagues' second-generation advantage theory. The article critiques and uses dimensions of each theory in explaining Emmanuel's success. It also draws attention to how Emmanuel develops "socially neutral operating identities" to negotiate his upward mobility. In this, the article uses Goffman's work on interaction and psychological work on priming and categorization. Finally, the article draws on Ragin's fuzzy set theory to better understand how youth inhabit different social categories to different degrees, at different times.

Emmanuel's Success

The author argues that Emmanuel's success in difficult circumstances was facilitated by three sets of factors and processes:

- extrafamily support from special educational programs in the New York City public schools and mentors;
- intrafamily dynamics, such as how children keep the immigrant bargain and their role in the family; and
- the skillful development of socially neutral operating identities.

NOTE: Emmanuel's success was fostered by trust between him and his mother.

Conclusion

Emmanuel's dramatic upward mobility is produced,

- first, through the special programs he benefits from and through his being offered, and accepting, the guidance of very dedicated mentors;
- second, by his status as favorite son, as the third child, and as the best keeper of the immigrant bargain; and
- third, by his own ability to develop socially neutral operating identities in the several contexts through which his climb takes him.

NOTE: In conclusion, Emmanuel's extraordinary success underlines the importance of focusing inquiry on areas that have not been used as main explanatory factors for upward or downward mobility in most research on the second generation.